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Black Radical Ecology and the African-Centered Paradigm

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“I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence.”

~ Frantz Fanon, “Black Skin, White Masks”

The problem of the 21st century is the divide between “the Man” and those of us who have been “Thing-ified.” It is a contradiction between the unending pursuit of profit on one hand and the affirmation of people and the planet on the other. It forces us to reckon with the conclusion that either Massa’s house gon burn, or the earth will burn. These are the only honest revelations that can be made about the ecocidal climate change we are living through. Because of the violent and hierarchical imposition of dominant/class interests, there are only two Ends for the world as we have known it: *communism or calamity*.

Our people have made our choice. For as long as this state of crisis has been the case, our people have struggled to transform our lived planetary conditions in the name

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of self-determination, autonomous community formation, and decolonization. We are riding for our people and our planet. And we have done so by first making a conscious and active return to practices and thinking that have been passed down from the ancestors (“going back”), and then making an application of the skills and knowledge wrapped up in this return (“fetching it”) to the movement of our history and the evolution of our societies. The Asante are most known for giving a name to this process: *Sankofa*, which implies that our growth from what is lost can only happen if we realize that it isn’t wrong to Return (*san*), Engage (*ko*), and Bring It Here (*fa*).

Sankofa is a highly useful model for Anarkatas understanding how our people animate the movement of history and evolution of society toward liberatory Ends. *Sankofa* should be interpreted as a model for how we enact structural change, how we direct our life beyond a state of group-differentiated ecological death to the conditions of safety that our people and our planet needs. It is on Sankofic grounds that we use concepts like “revolution.” Our “communism,” therefore, is situated in an Africanist/indigenous paradigm of reference. This must be said because there are some who believe, for example, that because many Anarkatas use “materialism” in our analysis, we have a Eurocentric regard for tradition. But, the truth is this: we always start with our traditions, which have deeply ecopolitical impact, strengths, and potentials for intervening in and overcoming the planetary dispossession or alienation we are faced with. But we maintain that one must consolidate more fully around and extend these traditions to make a more systemic intervention, to ultimately alter our collective ecological conditions in an encompassing way.

Return (*san*), Engage (*ko*), and Bring It Here (*fa*): for the Afrofuture will come only if there is a reconciliation of the empowering impulses of African tradition with the affairs of the *here-and-now*.

Return (*san*), Engage (*ko*), and Bring It Here (*fa*): for combining what Sam Mbah and I.E. Igariwey call Afrikan “communalistic” values and organizational structures within the context of modern social struggle and modern conditions is valuable.

Return (*san*), Engage (*ko*), and Bring It Here (*fa*): for what some have called a ‘dialectical’ synthesis of traditional egalitarianism is necessary to eradicating what Kwame Nkrumah called the “social malefactions and deep schisms of capitalist industrial society.”

Let no one say that to use this framework is Eurocentered. There is surely a popular Greek association with ‘dialectics,’ but let us recall first that the Greeks studied philosophy in Kemet. Let us recall, further, that white people, including many white so-called revolutionary heroes, consistently demonstrate through their colonialist need for reductionism, essentialism, and mechanistic thinking that dialectical synthesis and contextual application of knowledge is something they don’t know how to do well at all. Let us say to ourselves instead that yes, it is well and good to derive freedom from our general dislocation by *Returning* “to the circle” of participation with our traditions. These are completely oppositional to the dominant/colonial world, and we need them for cohesion and coherence. As Ashanti Alston reminds us, our ‘Black’ as anarchic radicals is our cultures, which figure as a ‘touchstone’ for resistance. But, let us also say, in agreement with Shamara Shantu-Riley, that since traditional Africanisms are also about “both/and perspectives” then, if we are always only returning “to the circle” without also fetching our oppositions for directed (“linear progress”) frameworks like revolutionary propositions of anarchy or communism, then our movement is incomplete. Black people have always made flexible use of the strengths of whatever tools are available to us, and so it is Africanist to follow *Sankofa* wisdom in the discussion of our ecopolitical future: which means bringing what we return to and engage with in our traditions here to our immediate *material* conditions, for

the purpose of pushing our movements toward widely liberating societal/historical transformation on our planet.

Now, an emphasis on the material plane is not because of a belief that therein is the only or most important factor of life. Even Marx and Engels, limited as they were in many ways, did not assert this, and instead emphasized that materialist analysis was important for understanding what the “primary” determining factor for the development of societal history is. This is to say, in other words, that the material is the *key* arena upon which societal/historical domination and *struggle* is played out. Dig deep and one will find that the etymology of the word “material” is the Latin *materia* from which we get “matter.” *Materia*, furthermore, is from the Latin *mater*, which means “source, origin, mother.” I call our attention to these etymological roots of ‘materialism’ because it helps us bring our revolutionary analytical concerns about what terrain of our lives is the primary factor in societal/historical transformation back to the *Mater*, the source, the origin, the mother — the earth. This is important for the Sankofic model. To have a materialism which emphasizes the planet as a ‘source’ comes from a position that is well established in Africanist tradition.

Kwesi Densu, when tracing ecophilosophy within Afrikan traditional thought and practice, writes that “the notion of the earth as... the *source* of subsistence and economic stability and the *progenitor* of all things related to ethical behavior and social cohesion, is a common idea within indigenous African philosophy” (emphasis mine). Densu looks at *Omenala* among the Igbo, *Maat* from Kmt, *Asase Yaa* among the Akan, as well as Bakongo, Gamo, and Bamana examples. Similarly, Shamara Shantu-Riley points us to *Da* among the Fon people, *Ase* among the Yoruba people, *Nyam* in many West Afrikan cultures, and *Nommo* among other West Afrikan cultures. She reminds us that these socio-spiritual referents “envision interdependence between human and nonhuman nature.”

iterations, large or small, of that ‘inextricable bind’ Shantu-Riley speaks about between material domination and human bondage. This lens provides us a consciously radical approach to the Return and Engage “within the circle” of our traditions, enabling us to overcome co-optation by confronting both coloniality and internal corruption, with the final stage of Bringing it all Here to the present journey and directing it in struggle that uproots the material basis of modern structures.

The *Sankofa* proverb is a lesson that there should be nothing wrong about taking on this position. It is not shameful, and it is not Eurocentric. Let us, therefore, boldly walk as the bird does in that Return (*san*), Engage (*ko*), and Bring It Here (*fa*) model.

Return (*san*), Engage (*ko*), and Bring it Here (*fa*): directed and lined up with radical propositions.

Return (*san*), Engage (*ko*), and Bring it Here (*fa*): the Ends being total liberation and affirmation for our people and the planet.

Return (*san*), Engage (*ko*), and Bring it Here (*fa*), for we are surely on the move, but we cannot continue the journey unless we are unashamed about returning to the ancestors, going to their wisdom and practice, and then bringing it to modern application against the current material conditions that make a conscious remembering of their insights necessary in the first place.

life too. Kwame Nkrumah teaches us that feudalism existed in precolonial Afrika too, as did forms of slavery and coerced labor. There were also historical empire formations on the Continent before Eurocolonialism. Different as they all were from the European systems, they were forms of earth-taking and economic subjugation that dislocated people from whole participation with the planetary source of our power, and in some instances twisted spiritual traditions toward metaphysical justifications for such authority/hierarchy and rule — benefitting the powerful, or at least failing to affirm the collective.

So, yes, Anarkatas are certainly inspired by and constantly looking to our traditions, but it would be unconscionable for the Anarkata to remain fine with the contradictions and corrupt tendencies that exist “within the circle” of our alternative ecological/societal/historical paradigms. These might be less violent in scale and scope than those forced onto us by Massa, but it’s still counterintuitive not to address them. Colonization takes advantage of the existence of these internal contradictions, to divide us and rule over us. Euro-colonial devastation the world over was aided and abetted by appeals to pre-existing antagonisms. The colonizer uses the presence of despotisms among us to naturalize domination and ecocide, portraying it as a “fundamental” trait we all share as a species. Further, colonization makes appeals to these non-Western/pre-colonial forms of authority and hierarchy we (may) hold to by making capitalist horrors seem like ‘natural’ (and thus ‘valid’) progressions or developments of them, and thus mystifying capitalism as if it should be a part of our national identities. Dominant forces play a twisted version of *Sankofa* with our traditions, Going Back to and Engaging them to then Bring them Here, but in the direction of reactionary movement. The Ends of their movement is to maintain the colonial/capitalist and cisheteropatriarchal propositions which will bring about our ruin.

Since revolutionary activity emphasises the ecopolitical, it thereby exposes and confronts all historical and societal

Further, she argues that within these schemas, “the Earth... must be treated with respect, as... our elder.”

Riley further states that this Afrocentric perspective is in contrast to the Euro-Christian worldview which has a “disdain” for the “the Earth’s body.” The Euro-Christian worldview demonizes the material world and mandates an escape from it in the name of assuring change. This worldview provided ideological justification for Church and Crown authority, and later for capitalist and State-imperial authority. But Afrocentric paradigms locate divinity *in* the material world, such that change is most affected *through engagement with* nature. This allows us to see our empowerment and transformation *within* the planet. Kwesi Densu says that in the Afrikan traditional milieu, “the most tangible expression of the creator is nature. Nature is the *conduit through which humans comprehend* how the universe functions.” (emphasis added).

In our traditions, the biophysical reality is entangled with divine forces and power, vital to both metabolic and socio-spiritual affirmation, but this sacral nature is a “concretely experienced” and “day-to-day” interactive edifice by which the world is understood and affirmed. It is well established by the ancestors, then, that our species is an ecological one, dependent on and part of the environment, arising from it, nurturing and being tended to by and within it, and that *engaging with it* is a *primary determining factor* in not just the development our society/history but in the basis of how we comprehend the wider universe itself. These traditions underlie why some Anarkatas say that the leftist demand for “power to the people” can only be fulfilled by bringing all people to the earthly source of our power. We are Returning (*san*) to, Encountering (*ko*), and Fetching (*fa*) what’s been passed down by our ancestors about how participation with the earth is an immediate source of life and vessel for consciousness; and this is why we work to animate movement against the ecopolitical crises of the here and now in a materialist fashion.

As such, however, we do not idealize the social and ecological impact of traditional practice/thought. This is one of the key features of a Sankofa-based model for understanding how our people wage struggle for the transformation of societal/historical conditions on this planet. Review the ideogram or Adinkra symbol which represents *Sankofa* and we find that there is *conscious alignment* of what's in the egg to the bird's movement. That is because, if we follow the symbol, the bird is *using its head*, even while on its journey forward, to Return, Engage, and Bring Here that which is at work "within the circle" (in the egg). There is, then, a logical component to how our people enact the movement of history or the evolution of society.

Sankofa is not romantic revival but is about us thinking through and with our people/ancestors about what exactly we are nurturing and developing and striving to bring to/apply within our present conditions as we journey toward freedom. Anarkatas do not overestimate the concretely liberating impact of tradition. Or, rather, we believe a conscious extension of our traditions' materialist potential is highly important to fulfilling liberatory Ends, important to accounting for and destroying the oppression at the root of our global environmental crisis. Practically and intellectually, we do not overstate the anarchic (egalitarian) or ecopolitical (sustainable) arrangements of Afrikan communal societies and pre-colonial Afrikan life. It is an error and idealistic to assume that a simple oppositional Return and Engagement with tradition is enough to get us free. Traditions do much, but everything must be remixed and updated to interface with new problems. The antagonisms of today are wholly distinct from what our ancestors' inventions originally accounted for; which means, without our contributions, they alone are not enough. As Amilcar Cabral once said: "If we want to do something in reality, we must see who has already done the same, who has done something similar, and who has done something opposite, *so that we can learn something* from their experience. *It is not to copy completely*, because

every reality has its own questions and its own answers for these questions." (emphasis added)

Today's reality is the so-called 'Anthropocene' or the 'Man's world' of white power, a never before seen set of conflicts where environmental and social destruction are at a heightened level. As some Anarkatas have said elsewhere:

"It is a world divided into compartments, borders and partitions, where the ordering principle is captivity and extreme forms violence.

It is a world of cisheterosexual domination, white supremacist patriarchy, and ableist oppression.

It is a world of military occupations, multinational corporations, prisons and modern-day plantations.

It is a world of universalized white symbolisms, theologies and philosophies.

It is a world that is white, where Western imperialism and colonialism have greatly extended the reach of the West with catastrophic results for third world people and for the environment.

It is a world where capitalist extraction of resources and the pollution left in its wake threaten to hurl us towards climate disaster."

But Shamara Shantu-Riley reminds us world history in general is one where some people "inextricably bind" the material domination of the planet with the economic domination of other people. This was/is also true of non-Western and ancient