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The African Concept of Sankofa and Anglicanism

The *Akan* concept of Sankofa is a philosophical mechanism that enjoins the thinking being not to live an unexamined life but to allow one's life to be constantly informed and defined by a constant monitoring of the present in relation to the past and the future.

The concept of *Sankofa* assumes that the present is hardly on its own; that the past is a dynamic reality that cannot be divorced from and ignored in our consideration of the present and the future. The message is the narrative of the past is relevant to the present. ***Tete wo bi ka*** (The past has a contribution to make to the present) and for that matter, the future.

Sankofa in that sense teaches us that we must constantly monitor the present by going back to our roots in order to move forward. We should critically examine the past and gather the best of what our past has to teach us, so that we can concretize our full potential as we engage the present in anticipation of the future. Reclaiming what we have lost or been stripped of through modernity, and preserving and perpetuating it as we engage the present in view of the future is critically imperative for the present and the future.

At the heart of the *sankofa* concept, the literal translation of which is: "It is not a taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind," then are two important categories, namely a sense of **history** and **tradition** that must inform our consideration in the here and now.

History

We must clearly take into cognizance the fact that the past serves as a guide for planning the future. It is this critical retrieval of the past that ensures a strong future. Looking into one's past with a clear understanding that what one is in the present one owes it to the past is very crucial and critical.

From the onset one must make it clear that Christianity is a historical religion in the sense that its claims rest on crucial events that took place in the past. To quote D.W. Bebbington:

The redemption of the world was achieved not through some process beyond time but through the work of Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, who lived at a specific time in history. Faith in him therefore entails beliefs about the incarnation, about the events of his life and about the accessibility of the past.¹

Christianity is defined and informed, among other things, by the past event of Christ. But it is also informed by strong traditions that emerged out of historical encounters and events. For Christians the past must be interpreted in providential terms. That is to say from the Christian perspective history operates only according to God's providential plan unfolded and unfolding through the Christ event.

What has been said in brief about Christianity as a whole can be said about Anglicanism, which has been described as "a tradition within Christianity comprising the Church of England and churches, which are historically tied to it or hold similar beliefs, worship, practices and church structures."

¹ D. W. Bebbington, "History" in Campbell Campbell-Jack and Gavin J. Mcgrath Ed. **New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics** (Leicester, Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2006), p. 320.

Tradition

Christianity is also characterized by a specific practice of long standing. Christianity is a Tradition in the sense of an inherited pattern of thought, practice and action. In other words, the Christian reality did not drop out of a vacuum It was determined by events and conditions that followed.

Christianity emerged out of a narrative and interactions of past events. The past as preserved and a narrative description inform and define the Christian reality. Christians cannot do without the past.

History, Tradition and Anglicanism

My little reading of Anglicanism or of the Anglican Communion is that concern and search for unity and diversity bespeak of modern Anglicanism. Anglicans and Episcopalians the world over share aspects of their history, tradition and liturgy, that is, ways of worshipping. But it can hardly be an understatement to say that Anglicanism is characterized with glaring diversity. No two churches are exactly alike. This unity in diversity is one of the distinctive features of the worldwide communion of Anglicans. The Anglican Communion exemplifies the value of unity in diversity. One will not be making an undelineated statement to say that the Archbishop of Canterbury is no doubt the “spiritual head’ of the Anglican Communion but the Communion has no central authority as Pope. The Archbishop of Canterbury is a *primus inter pares*.

In my humble submission, the historical antecedent of the modern Anglicanism, which I have defined in terms of the value of unity and diversity, must be seriously guarded and considered as a gem from the past that must serve as a guide for the planning of your future as a Communion. It will entail two approaches to be avoided, namely, theological assimilation and unbounded multiculturalism. I now consider each of the said approaches.

Theological Assimilation

Assimilation entails requiring minorities to abandon all of their distinctive institutions, religio-cultural values, habits and connections that inform their identities in order to fully mesh into the prevailing or dominant culture. In the context of the Western missionary Christianity, theological assimilation plays out as theological imperialism, which operates on the basis of *tabula rasa* mentality. The assumption that there is nothing positive in the culture of the so-called mission lands that can be utilized in the propagation and articulation of the Christian faith. A serious shortcoming of the Western missionary Christianity manifests in the form in which Christianity was presented to the people of the mission lands in Africa. The Christianity presented by the Western missionaries failed to penetrate to the heart of African personality. “The tendency of missionary Christianity to devalue traditional African culture and especially to dismiss traditional religion as heathen or pagan” only stifled authentic African input into Christianity, which is universal. One concurs with John Parrett: “This attitude left no room for a sympathetic appreciation of all that was good in African culture, nor for the assimilation of traditional ideas and rituals into Christianity.”²

The generality of all is to say that theological and cultural assimilation are unnecessary. We shall now consider the other pitfall to be avoided.

Unbound Multiculturalism

Unbound multiculturalism entails giving up the concept of shared values, loyalties and identity in order to leverage and privilege religious and cultural differences under the assumption that the unity of the church (communion) can be replaced by a large number of diverse minorities. This option, in my view, hardly allows for unity in diversity. It only highlights a parochial mentality, which betrays a penchant for half-truths, narrowness of thought and mediocrity. This option is surely unnecessary.

² John Parrett, **A Reader in African Christian Theology** Rev. Ed. (London: SPCK, 1997), p.5

Diversity Within Unity

In my view a value of Anglicanism that should continue to serve as a guide for planning the future of the church, in the sense of the *sankofa* concept, reduced to the simplest and most significant form possible without loss of generality, is diversity within unity. This presumes that individual members of the Anglican Communion will fully respect and adhere to the basic values and institutions that are considered part of the basic framework of the Communion. Here unity is understood in terms of commitment to the common good, shared history, values and common experiences.

At the same time every member of the Communion must be free to maintain its theological and ecclesial sub-culture. One is here referring to those habits, and institutions that do not conflict with shared core values and strong measure of loyalty to the Community as long as such held values do not trump loyalty to the Community.

Diversity within unity, so expressed, enriches rather than threatens the Communion. It allows for basic rights, the democratic governance of the Church and respect of its core values as well as the distinctive values of the individual members of the Communion that hardly conflict with the commonly shared values.

Diversity Within Unity and The Church's Missionary Nature

Any serious ecclesiology must include the understanding of the church as missionary. This is precisely because the Church is sent on a discipleship mission to all nations. The missionary character of the church challenges the Church to take the character and the different ways of life of all peoples into serious contention. It means the missionary nature of the Church challenges us to be conscious of the "the differences in our outlook on life, cultures and understanding of phenomena, etc."³

³ Peter K. Sarpong, **Peoples Differ: An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelisation.** (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publisher, 2002), p. 23.

The missionary nature of the Church must also awaken in us an equally important awareness of the culturally pluralistic nature of our world. As a worldwide Church involving people of different cultures in communion with one another, you are in a multi-cultural situation . A situation that should be utilized to enrich your communion as well as the cultures you are in communion with.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to remind you that the Akan word, *sankofa*, which has been the basis of our reflection teaches us that we must go back to our roots to gather the best of what our past has to teach us, in order that we can achieve our full potential as we move on. It is this critical retrieval of our past that ensures our strong future.

In my view the best of your past that you must critically retrieve to enhance contemporary expression of Anglicanism, to serve as your guide to the future is that which is at the heart of your being a Communion defined in terms of unity in diversity or diversity within unity. My little reading of your history tells me that Anglicans and Episcopalians the world over share aspects of their history, traditions and ways of worshipping – but no two churches are necessarily alike even within a diocese, let alone a province or between countries.

This unity in diversity is one of the things that make the Anglican Communion so special and rich ground from which to change the world by proclamation of the gospel of Christ. The unity and diversity, which is basic to Anglicanism, critically reflected on can be utilized to enrich Anglican, theology, liturgy and ecclesiology and indeed Christianity as a whole.