

Tell Me About Sankofa

It has become very fashionable in some parts of Africa and the diaspora to cry, Sankofa! Back to our African roots! The Akan Sankofa symbol, the bird looking backwards, is carved into official buildings in Ghana and stamped onto cloth. (Some say the bird is flying forward while looking backward with an egg in its mouth, symbolizing the future.) One can easily find websites and newspaper articles calling for Africa's people to return to their African roots. The idea has been used to demand a return to traditional African names, to encourage African style dress, to bolster the sale of traditional African dishes in restaurants, to cultivate bigger markets for African crafts and cloth. Alex Haley, in his well-known book which became the TV series ROOTS, sought to go back beyond his American slave ancestry, back to His African heritage. Islamic propagandists urge us to go back beyond modern Christian influence to Islamic tradition. Others urge us to go back beyond Christianity to African Traditional Religions.



The cry "Sankofa!" has also become the rallying cry of the occult, anti-Christian Afrikania Mission, sometimes known as the Afrikan Renaissance Movement. To them Sankofa means going back to idolatry or worship of spirits--the traditions left to us by the ancestors. This group feels that Christianity is not authentically African, despite the fact that **Christianity came to Africa very early and was accepted in Africa before it was in Europe.** Despite historical evidence to the contrary, Afrikania insists that only African Traditional Religion is legitimately African.

Some Africans and more noticeably, African Americans have used the Sankofa slogan to promote African Traditional Religions, talking of it as a stolen legacy of the African people. Often these feelings are tied into the idea that Christianity was the religion of the western slave masters, so those who were victimized by slavery should reject it in favor of older spiritistic or animistic religions. They sometimes speak in terms of a mythic ancient African consciousness, although Africans have begun to think of themselves as a unified people only in very recent years.

The basic concept of Sankofa, going back to regain what has been lost, is legitimate. It is the specific usages of the term that can sometimes be problematic and even damaging. The concept is legitimate because every people needs to understand its heritage. We all need to value the good that has been handed to us by our ancestors. **The Bible in several places talks about getting back to our roots, so if the Akan actually had an idea very much in agreement with Biblical principles.**

But if a people want to look for their roots, they should not be satisfied with going back only a few generations. **We have to realize that roots are often long, and we cannot pull out a root completely without digging way down to the taproot where it presses into the soil.** This can easily be understood if you think what happens when you pull out a dandelion plant or a young mango tree. If you don't work hard to carefully dig way down deep to the end of the root, what happens? It starts growing again. So--which is the root? The little short stub you pulled out? Or the long taproot that you have to really dig deep to get to the end of it?

Afrikania Mission digs down a bit, finds the root involves worship of nature and ancestral spirits, and quickly claims that this is the only legitimate African worship, and that we should go back to it. African Christians, of course, cannot subscribe to go back to any roots that include worship of idols or spirits, for the first two commandments of God warned against those practices (Exodus 20:1-6). We can, however, subscribe to the Sankofa movement in the sense of enjoying and appreciating own culture and especially in the sense of getting back to the root of things. **After all, what book takes us back to the root of things more than the Holy Bible?**

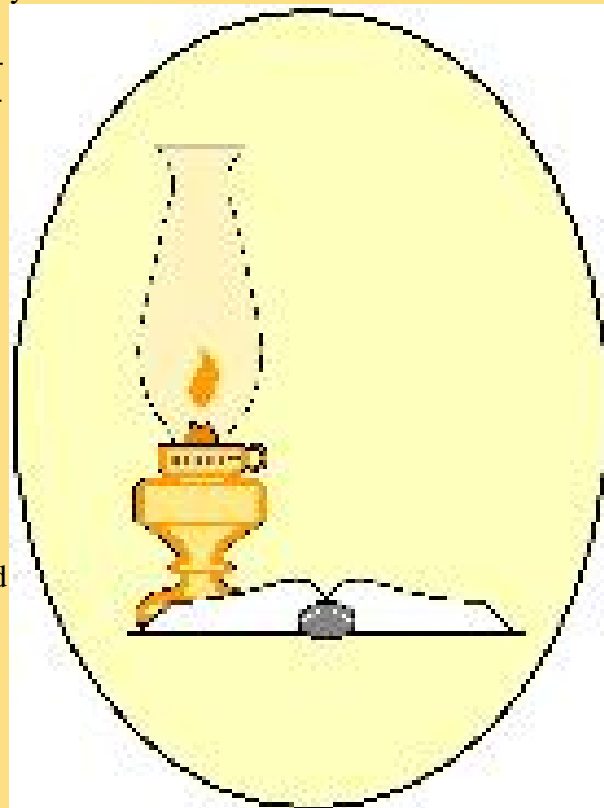


Biblical examples of getting to the root of things:

Jesus, divorce and marriage: When Jesus was asked a difficult question about divorce, when He wanted people to really understand marriage, He took His questioners back to the root of marriage. The Pharisees thought they were going back to their cultural roots when they quoted their ancestor Moses, but Jesus focused their attention on God's purpose for marriage by going deeper--by following the root of marriage back to God's creation (Marck 10:2-9).

The book of Genesis: The Bible begins with the book of Genesis. Do you know what Genesis means? It means ORIGINS, which is just another words for ROOTS. The Bible does not begain with the birth of Jesus Christ. In a sense the whole Old Testament is a collection of books of ROOTS, or preparations for the coming Messiah. God begins to tell us His story of His love for us by taking us back to our roots, to the origin of humanity.

The Biblical priesthoods: Most of the Old Testament gives an accounting of God's dealings with Israel. Israel had a priesthood, described in the Bible book of Exodus. Most Jewish people thought they were going back to their roots by remembering how God chose their ancestor Aaron and his sons to be the first priests for their nation (Exodus 28). Jesus was also a priest, but to understand His priesthood, we have to go back past Exodus, past the ancestors of the Jewish people, back to the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis. We have to go back to the Levitical priesthood that had been handed to the Jews by their immediate ancestors. God said that the priesthood of Jesus had deeper roots than that. They had to go back past Moses, back to the time of Abraham to understand those roots. Those roots went way back to the ancient order of Melchisedek.



Here's an important question. Why do we settle so often for such short roots, when we could tap

into the real root that gets back to our real origins? It's great to go back to our roots, and not at all an unbiblical idea in itself, as we have already seen. But why do some proponents of "Sankofa" so often stop short? Why are they satisfied with such a short section of root?

Here's one example. Many defend the worship of so-called "lesser gods" or "small, small gods" (idols or spirits) on the basis that the African ancestors did it, so it must be right. Yet the Apostley Paul in his definitive treatise on Christian doctrine (the Bible book of Romans) condemns the world for its idolatry and proclaims that **before our ancestors became idolatrous, they knew God** (Romans 1:21-25).

Some say, "Let's go back beyond colonialism--back to the time of black African kingdoms." So we have some groups like Afrikania proposing that Africans go back to the gods of Egypt. From the immense Egyptian pantheon of gods, some groups arbitrarily choose the the Egyptian god "Amen Ra" to worship, while others choose another god. They choose smorgasbord style.



God is not a human being, that he should lie, nor a mortal, that he should change his mind.
NUMBERS 23:19

A Plea to Dig Deeper

So, let's find our roots. In this, the Christian faith asks only one thing of us--to **DIG DEEPER**. Get back to the END of the root. Dig up the whole root. Find that taproot --that growing point that pokes its way further nd further down into the soil. Only then can we really get back to our roots.

Back to Egypt--

If you go back to Egypt, don't go back only as far as the history recorded in the Bible book of Exodus, chapters 1-12, where idolatry dominates the nation and ultimately brings judgment from God. Go back further down the root. Go back nine chapters earlier in the Biblical history, to the book of Genesis chapters 44 & 45. There, Pharaoh welcomes the family of Joseph and honors Joseph, a man who worshipped the Creator God. Go back to Genesis chapter 12, where **an earlier Pharaoh easily recognized and obeyed the hand of God working in his life.**

Back to Noah's son Ham--

Go back to Ham, the original ancestor of many people groups today covering large parts of Africa, our ancestor who heard God speak and saw Him act, our ancestor who experienced God's grace and loving care at the time of the world-wide Deluge, **our ancestor who was blessed by Noah his father** (Genesis chapter 9).

If we follow the root down to the time between Noah and Abraham, we find what seems to be a transitional time when many then-young nations were headed toward idolatry, yet they are not totally hardened in its path. There are also at this time in history many exceptions to the idolatrous trend. Some worship the Lord, the Creator. Even in the Promised Land, God did not give the land to Abraham because "the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet full" (Genesis 15:16). Melchisedek, priest of the city of Salem, was not idolatrous. The Bible describes him as "priest of the most high God," and uses him as a picture of Christ (Genesis 14:18). In the same time period, Job acted as a faithful priest of his family before God (Job 1:5) and was also a priest to God for others (Job 42:7). **There could well have been priests in Africa, too, during this period who knew God and worshipped Him faithfully without idolatry.**

Back to Creation--

Go back to Creation, the ultimate end of the taproot, as Jesus so often insisted on doing. In those ultimate roots we find where all people have their origin and ultimate meaning. **We are more than creatures of our ancestors, even though we respect them and appreciate how greatly they have contributed to our lives. We are ultimately creatures of Almighty God, created in His image, by His will and for His glory** (Genesis 1:27).

Read all the Bible has to say about Africa.

You can find prophecies of judgment on African nations because of their idolatry at different periods of history. Isaiah chapter 19 is an example, a prophecy against Egypt. "Behold, the LORD rides on a swift cloud, and will come into Egypt. The idols of Egypt will totter at His presence, and the heart of Egypt will melt in its midst" (Isaiah 19:1). **Yet the purpose of God's judgment is not ultimately to destroy, but to restore.** "And the LORD will strike Egypt, He will strike it and HEAL IT; they will RETURN TO THE LORD, and He will be entreated by them and heal them" (Isaiah 19:22). Even in judgment, God shows His love, His mercy, and His good plan and purpose for Africa! **He invites us not to be deceived by digging up shallow roots of idolatry, but to return to His original purpose in creating the beautiful people of Africa.**

Our Stand on Sankofa at Every Child Ministries

Every Child Ministries (ECM) is a Christian mission devoted to "the forgotten children of Africa." So at ECM, we say "yes, SANKOFA!" It's good for Africa and her children to return to their African roots. But at ECM we also remember that our African roots are long. We counsel our brothers and sisters to avoid breaking off our roots of African history halfway down in the ground. We say, let's return all the way. We say, let's go back past the so-called "lesser gods". Let's return to the Creator of the African peoples, the Creator of the great African continent with its boundless resources and its beautiful families of people. Let's return to the One True Living Eternal Creator God. Africa is sick to its stomach from eating short roots running just under the ground. The message of Every Child Ministries, like the message of all Christian churches, is that if we follow our roots to the taproot, we find not the small, small gods, but our Creator. He is waiting to heal us.



We recognize that Africa has never turned its back completely on God. Even the most idolatrous parts of African Traditional Religion still recognize the existence of a Creator God. But He is seen as far away, and we have not given Him the worship He desires and demands. He who said, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3) cannot accept the way we have given the small, small gods, the lesser spirits that He created, the worship that is due to Him. These lesser gods have robbed our Creator of His glory, and they have brought much trouble to the African people. Yet the God who made us loves us. He loves Africa! He still waits for Africa to return to Him so that she may be healed.

Sankofa, Africa, sankofa!



Return to your roots in your God

O, leave all your small, small lesser gods behind

O return to the God who created you

O return to the God who created you!

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