Towards a Vibrant & Broad African-Based Anarchism

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I am always on the search for cutting edge, challenging thinking within anarchism and other fields of revolutionary theory: the search for how to get beyond 'stuck.' As a Black anarchist I have looked for writings specifically related to the problems and challenges that I face, and that my people face here in the United States, and that can help us organize for self-determination and destroy the very basis upon which all oppressive systems operate. Of the activist "isms," anarchism, at least in theory, promotes the kind of openness and risk-taking that actually encourages the constant regeneration necessary to meet new revolutionary challenges. The price to pay, often, is getting "uncomfortable," being "jarred," even in terms of what one understood as the anti-authoritarian or anarchist canon.

The two works reviewed here, Post-Colonial African Theory and Practice: Wole Soyinka's Anarchism and African Anarchism: The History of a Movement, come from authors trapped in vicious post-colonial hells. They have "stretched their necks" to see and understand differently in order to just "breathe" and fight back. The stretching and openness to new information, new insights, is what keeps anarchism and other radical perspectives fresh and evolving to meet our planetary needs.

Wole Soyinka’s Anarchism

Post-Colonial African Theory and Practice by Joseph Walunywa, a Kenyan student who wrote in requirement for a degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English at Syracuse University in New York, was a rare find. Black and African writers on the subject of anarchism are rare, seemingly.

Wole Soyinka, the first African to win the Nobel Peace Prize (for Literature, 1986), is a controversial figure. He was brought up as a relatively privileged Nigerian of Yoruba culture, raised partially Christian and given a Western education. Though in-
debted to Western literary figures such as Nietzsche, Bertolt Brecht and G. Wilson Knight, he was also influenced by Franz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral, Julius Nyerere, and was familiar with the writings of anarchist thinkers such as Pierre Proudhon, Tolstoy, Gandhi, Albert Camus and Ignazio Silone. But his philosophical roots are deeply embedded in African and more specifically Yoruba mythology and culture. It was his grandfather, with whom he developed a special relationship, that gave him his groundings in Yoruba mythology.

It is in this Yoruban and Western reinterpretation of African myth that Walunywa finds the not-so-hidden anarchism.

Soyinka’s dramatic works include *Dance of the Forests, Death and the King’s Horseman, Madmen and Specialists*; his poetry, *Idanre and Other Poems; Autobiography, Ake: the Years of Childhood*; a novel, *The Interpreters*; literary and cultural criticism, *Myth, Literature and the African World*; and political criticism, *The Open Sore of a Continent*.

His ability to play with both Greek and Yoruban drama and tragic themes has made his work unique. His analysis of the post-colonial absurdities of Nigerian and African power dynamics and his call for an “organic revolution” that derives its authenticity from Yoruba mythology has also made his productions controversial. For example, in 1960 the twenty-six year old Soyinka returned to Nigeria from England as the country achieved its nominal independence from England. His new play, *Dance of the Forest*, whose opening was timed to coincide with official celebrations, immediately placed him at odds

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1 Ignazio Silone (1900-78) was an Italian socialist and anti-fascist journalist and novelist. He authored *Bread and Wine* (1962) and defined himself as a “socialist without a party, Christian without a church.”

deeper into African everyday life. Complemented with various postmodernist analyses which challenge old positions on nationalism (Wahneema Lubiano, Benedict Anderson, Rajani K. Kanth, Manuel Castells, Partha Chatterjee), cultural revolution (bell hooks, semiotician Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka), and classical anarchism (Todd May, Saul Newman), Mbah and Igarwey’s work could be the foundation of greater critical analysis.

Walunywa has done a most valuable thing by bringing culture to the fore. His education in post-structuralism, as noted in his preface, indicates an ability to bring other perspectives into his work. For me, Walunywa’s interest in Soyinka’s anarchism may well be his own (he states: “Soyinka’s own concept of anarchism is the only truly revolutionary method available to mankind today”). If so, it may be Walunywa, more than Soyinka, who is our first acknowledged African anarchist philosopher to join the ranks of other thinkers—such as Gail Stenstad, Saul Newman, Todd May, Lorenzo Erving, Colin Ward, and Rolando Perez—who are pushing anarchist thinking toward new, urgent horizons.

Together, Post-Colonial African Theory and Practice: Wole Soyinka’s Anarchism and African Anarchism have taken on added importance for me while researching and writing this review. Their hints, insights, focuses should be taken up by grassroots black revolutionaries and others who go through the existential suffering of being “stuck” in time and ineffective as movements.

Notes

28 I do want to admit the heavy male and western bias of my own resources, especially in not being able to refer to any women of color anarchist theoreticians or philosophers for this review. Self-criticism is here.
which reflect the values of ‘modern civilization’ as conceptualized through the prevailing ideologies in order to pave the way for the recuperation of ‘primordial culture’ as conceptualized through the ‘cosmologies’ of ‘endogenous societies.’”

It is "the consistent resistance—the desire to break free of—all forces, irrespective of whether they originate from 'the Left' or from 'the Right,' that seek to confine either the individual or the community within any established social, economic, or political constitutional barricade."

By "endogenous societies" one should think "indigenous" with Walunywa’s focus on the role of mythological or symbolic systems within these societies. He is referring to the specific mythological or symbolic practices that existed before the imposition of European colonialist modernity around the world and that are part of cultures that continue to resist by holding on to their mythical ritual archetypes. They are endogenous reenactments of the unity, contradiction and struggle of existence; ritual archetypal reenactments found the world over that highlight and "myth poeticize" such dramatic themes as death and rebirth, disintegration and recuperation, destruction and creation, suffering and compassion, fragmentation and reassemblage, and fallibility and remediation. These traditions contain built-in mechanisms for constant resistance, revision, recuperation and revolution.

Walunywa states: "the primary function upon which endogenous society is developed—"the ritual archetype"—is believed to be ‘revolutionary’ in terms of the freedom it affords the individual and the community because it is thought to provide the medium through which the individual and the community in question maintain an intimate relationship with primordial

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4 Ibid., 75.
5 Ibid., 3, 23.
6 Ibid., 116.

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**Conclusion**

In developing a broad and vibrant African-based anarchism, these two works can provide insights that anarchists and revolutionaries in general are missing. Together they offer a combination of culture and class analyses that take in the whole of peoples’ lives: their ritual everyday lives and their class-based, post-colonial lives. Walunywa’s analysis of Soyinka gives us insight into the significance of everyday Yoruban resistance, whereas Mbah and Igariwey give us a strong class analysis of the African crisis and suggest an anarchistic perspective that could free the continent.

But it is worth noting that Walunywa does not mention the criticism Soyinka has received for being elitist and sexist in his works. For example, Ngugi wa Thiong’O has criticized his works for downplaying the power of the masses while overemphasizing the tragic hero’s ability to bring about change.

Also, his women characters are, more often than not, stereotypical femmes fatales and Soyinka focuses on the three male gods, when there is just as much revolutionary potential in the goddesses Osun, Oya, and Yemoja. The decision is his, as was the decision of Ibo writer Flora Nwapa, for example, to focus on Ogbuide, the Lake Goddess (aka "Mammywata"), or Ama Ata Aidoo, Ousmane Sembene and Ngugi wa Thiong’O to give women more diverse revolutionary roles in their literary works, and thus encourage more possibilities for female and male readers. African Anarchism, though strong on class analysis, could also benefit from a stronger feminist analysis as well as insights from works such as by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Filomina Chioma Steady, and Florence Stratton that dig

fail, but insist that this does not detract from Nyerere's argument. A small commentary is devoted to Muammar Gadhafi's "Third Universal Theory" and his concept of jamahiriya. Though it is another experiment in socialism initiated by the state (and like so many others, the state emerged from a liberation movement), it is theoretically bold and deserves more attention, along with the revolutionary socialist works of Nyerere, Sekou Toure, Augustino Neto, Samora Machel, Amilcar Cabral, Kwame Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba.

In "Anarchism and the National Question in Africa" the authors again, I feel, rely too strongly on a European experience, which ties nationalism to capitalism, national and ethnic chauvinism, and the construction of a state. This perspective does not articulate the full creativity of nationalism and national liberation movements.

Mbah and Igariwey subsume nationalism, culture, and the spirituality of subject peoples under the class struggle, specifically under the workers and peasants' struggle. But real folks are also Ibo, Yoruba, Ogoni, women, youth, university teachers, traders, construction workers, etc. Nationalist movements have strong identity components that are not grounded in abstract political economic categories. Fresh thinking is needed and can be drawn from analyses of nationalism and liberation movements found in feminist, postmodernist, and cultural studies. There is already a small, but growing body of work on non-state or anti-state nationalisms being developed by anarchists and anti-authoritarians.

culture and its liberating forces (and consequently exist in a diametrical opposition with modern culture and its alienating forces) without completely relinquishing their respective sense of selfhood and community." Walunywa makes it clear that the anarchist lessons, the tools, are actually in the ritual dramas themselves. He argues that Soyinka brings their anarchic, communal character to center stage through his art and literary productions, and also in the fields of politics and post-colonial revolution. Let us follow the story, as culled from the works of Walunywa, Soyinka, Clyde W. Ford, and Jane Wilkinson:

In the beginning there was only one godhead, known as Orisa-nla, a beingless being, a dimensionless point, an infinite container, including itself. This uncreated creator had a slave known as Atooda or Atunda. As Orisa-nla was working in a hillside garden, Atunda rebelled, rolling a massive boulder down the hill, smashing Orisa-nla into many fragments. So, the story goes, these fragments became the Yoruba gods and goddesses known as "orishas" with their number varying from 201 to 1,001 or more.

Of these many orishas, a handful represent key figures in the pantheon and wisdom tradition of the Yoruba. Soyinka keys in on, draws from, and gives his own unique interpretation to the main careers of the gods Obatala, Shango and Ogun. Of the three, it is Ogun with whom he found a personal affinity as a

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25 For further commentary, see Thomas Martin, "Society Its Own Supervisor: Qathafi's Democratic Theory," Social Anarchism, No. 15 (1990): 42. Martin defines jamahiriya as the "state of the masses" or "people-dom."
youngster and whom, according to Walunywa, he develops as the archetypal anarchist. The story continues:

Originally both divinity and humanity were contained in the godhead, Òrisa-nla, and there was no earth as we know it. To make a long story short, Òbatala, the symbol of the power to shape life, made human beings from clay and called on the supreme orisha, Òlorun, to breathe life into them. It was done. Later, there was a crisis and a problematic separation between the orishas and humanity emerged. In the West, after "The Fall" it is the task of humanity to find its way to The One & Only God. In Yoruba, as in many other endogenous cultures, it is the orishas, the gods and goddesses, who journey to the earthly realm, for in their divine state they were incomplete and needed to re-embrace humanity to make them whole. It was Ògun who forged the sacred path for the return of divinity to humanity.11

With this we are being asked to accept the validity of a non-Western perspective and way of making sense of life. This may prove difficult for Marxists, anarcho-communists, and syndicalists who have learned to see the world only through the lens of science, reason and objectivity, with "the worker" as the epicenter of change. But, as Paul Feyerabend argues in Against Method, "there is no idea, however ancient and absurd, that is not capable of improving our knowledge."12 He also states that the indigenous thinker often shows greater insight into

22Ibid., (http://www.illegalvoices.org/apoc/books/aa/ch6.html)  
23They write: "It is ultimately in the seminal thoughts of Julius Nyerere that we glean an organized, systematic body of doctrine on socialism that is indisputably anarchistic in its logic and content." (Ibid., http://www.circlealpha.com/library/african_anarchism/precedents.html)  
24They write: "Their community would be the traditional family group, or any other group of people living according to Ujamaa principles, large enough to take account of modern methods and the twentieth century needs of man." Ibid.
but it is not at all unknown as a way of life.”\textsuperscript{18} In other words, Mbah and Igariwey are saying: “here are the ‘anarchic elements,’\textsuperscript{19} “here are indigenous roots.” In their last chapter, “Anarchism’s Future in Africa,” the authors return to these roots to advance a revolutionary perspective for liberation from the post-colonial, neo-liberal devastation of the African continent: “Given these problems, a return to the ‘anarchic elements’ in African communalism is virtually inevitable.”\textsuperscript{20} There is hope grounded in concrete historical (and present-day) examples of stateless, government-less, police-less societies.

Mbah and Igariwey do not paint a romantic, rosy picture of these “tribes without rulers.” Communalism was not an anarchist utopia. But mechanisms were in place to work out social problems through a participatory, broadly inclusive form of democracy that we call consensus. This is startling information for those of us accustomed to seeing life as structured upon rich and poor, government and led, police and policed citizenry, White and nigger.

With religion or spirituality, Mbah and Igariwey do point out its significance in traditional life and the cohesive role it played: “Religion, in this sense, was primarily a theoretical interpretation of the world, and an attempt to apply this interpretation to the prediction and control of worldly events. . . . The idea that ‘spiritual forces’ translated into a notion of gods, an earth spirit or a powerful guardian spirit that was personal to individual members of the community. . . . In short, the gods are not only theoretical entities, they are people.”\textsuperscript{21}

Whereas Soyinka would see this aspect of indigenous religion as dynamic, in “Obstacles to the Development of Anar-

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., (http://www.circlealpha.com/library/african_anarchism/future.html).
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., (http://www.circlealpha.com/library/african_anarchism/precedents.html).

the nature of knowledge than those who deal exclusively with Western science. “It is . . . necessary, to reexamine our attitude towards myth, religion, magic, witchcraft and towards all those ideas which rationalists would like to see forever removed from the surface of the earth (without so much as having looked at them—a typical taboo reaction).”\textsuperscript{13}

By paying homage to the gods within the context provided by the ritual, the individual, working on behalf of the community, consistently lets go of and recovers his or her sense of self-constitution. If one wishes to get out of the post-colonial crisis, the ritual says, first, “Yes, automatically, you have the right to rebel,” and second, “you must now prepare and transit through an unavoidable hell to acquire the powers, insights, skills, and unities necessary for you and the community to move to the ‘Liberation Hilltop.’” This letting go or relinquishing of the self into the abyss, chthonic realm, or the chaos implies being torn asunder from all those alienating forces and ideological influences, individually and collectively internalized, that has kept one stuck in a restricted state. It is in this way that the ritual of transition provides a kind of built-in mechanism for making a transition from a confining, compartmentalizing, oppressive existence to more liberatory and free realities.

For Soyinka, the transition itself is a principle and Ogun is what could be called the principal “transit conductor.” The activity of going through something is a fact of life and not always, and maybe even rarely, a pleasant journey. But through it, through the abyss, the chthonic realm or chaos, there are the elemental forces upon which one can draw to bring about re-assemblage, recuperation and creativity.

Walunywa points to Soyinka’s use of Ogun as the tragic hero whose job it is to make this transition happen. It is Ogun’s story
that is most instructive here. ("Ogun is the embodiment of challenge, the Promethean instinct in man, constantly at the service of society for its full self-realization."\textsuperscript{14})

The principle of destruction and creativity set in motion by Atunda’s boulder is repeated anew in the activity of Ogun.\textsuperscript{15} Soyinka places him at the center of Yoruba metaphysics. He becomes the essence of creativity itself. He is the individualist anarchist, the iron worker, the reluctant leader, or Nietzsche’s Superman, expressing the indomitable will to power (according to Soyinka) in the service of the community. He is the only god willing to make the transition through the abyss, through the chaos, to prepare the way for the others in their quest to reunify with humanity. In making the transition, he is also willing to be torn asunder, so that in re-assemblage he might help bring about communal change. It is evident in Walunywa’s commentary that Soyinka has recreated the character of Ogun in such a way that he can be most useful in the context of Africa’s contemporary post-colonial, neo-liberal wreckage. This Ogunian anarchism is the theme that constantly expresses itself throughout Soyinka’s art, life, and revolutionary vision.

**African Anarchism: The History of a Movement**

1997 was a celebratory year due to the publication of the first major work on anarchism from a specifically African perspective. Authors Sam Mbah and I.E. Igariwey are both members of the Nigerian Awareness League, an anarcho-syndicalist organization at the time numbering up to one thousand members.


