

Towards a Vibrant & Broad African-Based Anarchism

Ashanti Alston

2003

Contents

Wole Soyinka's Anarchism	3
African Anarchism: The History of a Movement	7
Conclusion	9
Notes	10

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 indebted 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.¹ 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.² 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 Yoruban mythology has also made his productions controversial. For example, in 1960 the twenty-six year old Soyinka re-

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."

² Information on Soyinka's influences come mainly from Florence Stratton, "Wole Soyinka's Social Vision," *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 22, Number 3 (Fall 1988): 534. Stratton, interestingly, also associates anarchism with Soyinka's works. Also, see: Joseph Wilson, "Soyinka and Philosophic Traditions: European and African," (<http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/Soyinka.htm1>)

turned 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 with the newly installed leaders as well as with many of his fellow intellectuals. The play's theme focused on Africa's, and by extension Nigeria's, "recurrent cycle of stupidities," i.e. the chronic dishonesty and abuse of power that colonialism had bred in generations of indigenous political leaders and functionaries. Like Fanon and Nkrumah, he had dared to highlight class contradictions and other pitfalls of nationalism and neo-colonialism. He has maintained his criticism and vision for over forty years as an artist and a citizen-rebel.

By recounting the representation and play with Yoruba myth and ritual drama that runs through Soyinka's work, Walunywa seeks to demonstrate recurrent anarchist themes. Exciting. Can tragic or ritual drama in "endogenous" (Walunywa's term) society provide means for anarchic regeneration, recuperation, and a praxis of the "creative-destructive principle" in contemporary life? Does this have parallels in post-industrial Western societies, especially one like the United States, that has "captive nations within" (my words) that are "endogenous," including Black, Mexicano and Native American nations?

Walunywa presents a definition of anarchism, through Soyinka, that is based in African reality and, surprisingly, on ritual or tragic drama. I would call his work, "An Anarchism Defined Through The Ritual Drama of Endogenous Society." His 313 page dissertation presented quite a challenge: generally familiar with Africa's best known literary writer and playwright, I was less familiar with the specific literary and artistic usage of terms such as drama, ritual, tragedy, primordial, chthonic, archetype, abyss, Promethean, Apollo, Dionysus, etc., and the Yoruban mythology that infuses all of Soyinka's work.

Key to understanding Walunywa's expose is his definition of anarchism: "As used in this study, the term anarchism refers to a specific form of anarchism that I believe Soyinka has introduced in African intellectual discourse. . . . Anarchism is defined as the desire on the part of the individual concerned to deconstruct the social, economic and political institutions 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.'"³ 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."⁴

By "endogenous societies"⁵ 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 poietize" such dramatic themes as death and rebirth, disintegration and recuperation, destruction and creation, suffering and compassion, fragmentation and re-assembly, and fallibility and remediation.

³ Joseph Walunywa, "Post-Colonial African Theory and Practice: Wole Soyinka's Anarchism" (Ph.D. Diss., Syracuse University, 1997), 21.

⁴ Ibid., 75.

⁵ Ibid., 3, 23.

tion. These traditions contain built-in mechanisms for constant resistance, revision, recuperation and revolution.⁶

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 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."⁷ 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.⁸

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.⁹ Of the three, it is Ogun with whom he found a personal affinity as a youngster and whom, according to Walunywa, he develops as the archetypal anarchist.¹⁰ The story continues:

Originally both divinity and humanity were contained in the godhead, Orisa-nla, and there was no earth as we know it. To make a long story short, Obatala, the symbol of the power to shape life, made human beings from clay and called on the supreme orisha, Olorun, to breath 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

⁶ Ibid., 116.

⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁸ Compiled from the following and compared for consistency: Clyde W. Ford, *The Hero With An African Face* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 146; Jane Wilkinson, *Orpheus in Africa: Fragmentation and Renewal in Four African Writers/Between Orpheus and Ogun*(Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1990), 179-181; and Walunywa, "Post-Colonial African Theory and Practice," 92-115.

⁹ Walunywa, "Post-Colonial African Theory and Practice," 93-99.

¹⁰ Ibid., 104.

incomplete and needed to re-embrace humanity to make them whole. It was Ogun 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 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)."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 recuperates 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-assembly, 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."¹⁴)

The principle of destruction and creativity set in motion by Atunda's boulder is repeated anew in the activity of Ogun.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

¹¹ From Ford, *The Hero With An African Face*, 146; Jane Wilkinson, *Orpheus in Africa*, 179-181; and Walunywa, "Post-Colonial African Theory and Practice," 92-115.

¹² Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchist Theory of Knowledge*(http://pnaeae.com/phil/main_phil/fey/against.htm). See also, Arun Bala, Feyerabend and Scientific Method, (<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/phibalas/dialogue2001.Scientific%20Method/Feyerabend>)

¹³ Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchist Theory of Knowledge*, Ibid.

¹⁴ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (New York: Cambridge University, 1976), 30.

¹⁵ F. Odun Balogun, "Soyinka and the Literary Aesthetic of African Socialism," *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 22 Number 3, (Fall 1988): 521.

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. There are only a handful of reviews of the book and, sadly, I have yet to find a review in any black nationalist publication.

Though few people may associate anarchism with Africa, many black nationalist folk will associate with its close "cousins"—communalism and African socialism. Although anarchism still carries capitalist-constructed distortions, and leftist, Marxist dishonesty, it is both bold and dangerous for Africans to declare themselves anarcho-syndicalist and argue that anarchism has a legitimate place among liberation theories on the continent. And one must ask: Why? Thus far nothing has been able to resolve Africa's post-colonial, neoliberal crisis: neither liberal democracy, Marxism, capitalism, modernity, nor nationalism.

In an 1999 interview Mbah explained the spirit in which he and Igariwey outlined anarchism's relationship to Africa: "Although anarchism is not complete without the Western European contributions, we believe there are elements of African traditional societies that can be of assistance in elaborating anarchist ideas. One of these is the self-help, mutual aid, or cooperative tradition that is prevalent in African society."¹⁶

In the first two chapters they give a very general perusal of a European-based anarchist theory and history, and also a history of anarcho-syndicalism on the African continent. For me, the book begins with the third Chapter, "Anarchist Precedents in Africa," which identifies and expounds upon "anarchic elements"¹⁷ in pre-colonial stateless societies and explores how these elements manifest themselves today. Case studies focus on such communities as the Igbo, the Tallensi, and the Niger Delta peoples (notably, the hierarchical Yoruba are not chosen). "Anarchy as an abstraction may indeed be remote to Africans, but it is not at all unknown as a way of life."¹⁸ In other words, Mbah and Igariwey are saying: "here are the 'anarchic elements,'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

¹⁶ Chuck Morse, "African Anarchism: An Interview with Sam Mbah," *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory*, Spring 1999, 9.

¹⁷ Sam Mbah and I. E. Igariwey, *African Anarchism: The History of a Movement*(http://www.circlearpha.com/library/african_anarchism/precedents.html).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

elements' in African communalism is virtually inevitable."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."²¹

Whereas Soyinka would see this aspect of indigenous religion as dynamic, in "Obstacles to the Development of Anarchism in Africa (Religious and Cultural Factors)," the authors state: "like all religions, African religions also had conservative/reactionary aspects."²² They connect religion with despair and say that religion, especially imported Western religion, feeds on despair. Although this may simply reflect the authors' uncritical embrace of a European-based anarcho-syndicalist, anti-metaphysical perspective, one also learns that religion or spirituality is not static. There are ritual aspects, specifically in indigenous societies, that have built-in mechanisms for challenging the status quo and making change.

In reexamining the development of African socialism, the authors encourage us not to close the books on Nkrumah's positive socialism, Senghor's existential and "negritude" socialism, Nasser's democratic socialism, or Nyerere's Ujamaa (familyhood) socialism. Although all these varieties of African socialism were state-initiated and failures, Mbah and Igariwey believe that a very "genuine and credible attempt" was made in Tanzania under Julius Nyerere. Nyerere's thought is seen as an organized, systematic perspective on socialism that is "indisputably anarchistic in its logic and content."²³ His attempt to implement socialism through the concept of Ujamaa was novel. It was based on the community and the traditional family group, but took into account "modern methods and the twentieth century needs of man."²⁴ It called for village democracy and was not to be established through coercion, but rather persuasion and consensus. The authors contend that the intervention of bureaucracy and state corruption caused Ujamaa to 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 jamarrhiriyah.²⁵ Though it is another experiment in socialism initiated by the state (and like so many others, the state emerged

²⁰ Ibid., (http://www.circlealpha.com/library/african_anarchism/future.html).

²¹ Ibid., (http://www.circlealpha.com/library/african_anarchism/precedents.html).

²² Ibid., (<http://www.illegalvoices.org/apoc/books/aa/ch6.html>)

²³ They 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)

²⁴ They 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.

²⁵ For further commentary, see Thomas Martin, "Society Its Own Supervisor: Qadhafi's Democratic Theory," *Social Anarchism*, No. 15 (1990): 42. Martin defines jamahiriyah as the "state of the masses" or "people-dom."

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.

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.²⁶ 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 Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Filomina Chioma Steady, and Florence Stratton that dig 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 Igariwey's work could be the foundation of greater critical analysis.

²⁶ See Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Wole Soyinka, T.M. Aluko and the Satiric Voice," in *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1983). See also Mumia Abu-Jamal, "Soyinka's Africa," *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 31, No. 1: 37.

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"²⁷). 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.²⁸ 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

²⁷ Joseph Walunywa, " *Post-Colonial African Theory and Practice*," 124.

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.

Anarchist library
Anti-Copyright



Ashanti Alston
Towards a Vibrant & Broad African-Based Anarchism
2003

Retrieved on 17 August 2015 from <http://www.newformulation.org/3alston.htm>

en.anarchistlibraries.net