

Sankofa: Mythical Bird Personified

By Rev. Louis K. Tuffuor

Sankofa [San-ko-fa], a mythical bird, a proverbial bird personified: given a human voice. The Akan [Ah-can] cultural heritage of Ghana, West Africa, originates her as part of the Adinkra [Ah-din-cra] collection of symbols.



Fig 1: A Wood Sculpture of Sankofa

Sankofa image: A huge bird; her feet plants forward, not to lose sight of where she is going. Her head twists backwards to reclaim a golden egg. Golden egg symbolizing a gem: wisdom, knowledge of the past which possesses valuable lessons.

Sankofa, with ability to turn her neck to pick on her itchy back, says to the whole world: no situation, so bad, you cannot find anything good in it. Do not despair.

Look back without staying there;
Look back but do not stare,
Do not get frozen or stuck in euphoria.
Look back but do not give up.
Look back but have no desire to keep the *status quo*; or hold onto the past.

Be transformed in mind and in spirit;
Dwell not on the past, live in the present
and strategically plan for the future;
That was then, this is now. *Be not afraid*;
Be hopeful in all you do.

Sankofa literally means: Go back and retrieve. Learn from hindsight, it is a good thing to do; you cannot go wrong. A Rabbi

like the Akan says: *A person who asks does not get lost*. The past provides the roadmap forever knowing.

There is nothing new under the sun.
Whatever I know, I learned from kindergarten, so the saying goes.
The past is a reservoir of knowledge;
It serves as a guide for short-term and long-term planning for years to come.

Sankofa's Adinkra symbol is an intricate heart; a heart full of altruistic love and compassion for all.



Fig 2: Adinkra Symbol: The Heart of Sankofa

Sankofa, with colorful wings, flies wide, flies high, unique and flexible in flight, exceptionally adaptable and dependable. She is all inclusive. In search of meaning, she reaches beyond self, touching everyone, everything in front and behind.

Sankofa, symbolizes Akan quest for the reservoir of knowledge; a quest sought through critical examination, indispensable discipline, consensus building, and significant investigation of yesteryears.

Sankofa is present in all fields of academia: literature, folklore, education, sociology, art, music, anthropology, history, geography, philosophy, theology, spirituality, ministry, science, religion, engineering, archeology, medicine, law, military and politics, etcetera.

In education, **Sankofa** teaches the 3R's: Reading, wRiting, aRithmetic. She remembers a fourth R—Religion, for *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge*.

In medicine and other helping professions, **Sankofa** advises: listen with empathy to people; listen not just their words, but their

pauses, hesitations, nuances, and body language; louder than words these speak.

In ministry, maintain your sense of humor, preach and counsel in ways people can readily understand. Be practical; practice *companionship* as a philosophy, a way of life: build relationships first, then care, support, and confrontation will follow easily.

In Military terms, **Sankofa** is the symbol for the rearguard company; a company responsible for survival of society, defense of her heritage and strategic advancement into the future.

In daily encounters, should you overlook an acknowledgment; a thank you, for an act of kindness done to you, do not be proud, be humble; go back and express your gratitude, better late than never.

Can you be the leper who returned to Jesus with a gesture of gratitude?
Thank you Jesus! Where are the others?
Even the divine appreciates appreciation and so must we.

Recall history, learn its lessons.
Forget history and you repeat the mistakes of the past. Don't be like the fool.
Scrutinize the past; *be wise as the serpent, humble as the dove.*

Sankofa's methodology in search of meaning, providing a never-to-forget approach: Go back to basics.
That which is reliable, that which is stable.
In doubt, go to the primary source.
Respect the past and learn from it.

Sankofa speaks the words of Socrates:
An unexamined life is not worth living.
Focus reflection on where you have been and where you are going;
It is valuable and necessary.

Often, you need to visit where you came from to find out where you are going.
Return to your roots, recapture what was lost and move on. In your roots, you find a sense of purpose, a sense of direction.

Sankofa remembers leaders of history, ancestors, and saints; *a cloud of witnesses* they form, urging us on, encouraging us to focus on the finish line; empowering us to be strong, motivated, and fruitful.

What are your passionate dreams?
To make them come true, practice the **Sankofa** approach: Go back to basics; Go back and retrieve:
Who am I?
Where am I going?
How am I going to get there?
So say **Sankofa**, so say you!

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Resources

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