

“You Know De Snake A Go Eat What Ina De Frog Belly”

The Jamaican Language in Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa*

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Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima is an important figure in Black Independent Cinema.¹ His film *Sankofa* (1993) is highly regarded for its empowering portrayal of Afrikan resistance against enslavement in the United States.² Mona, the main character, is an Afrikan American model doing a photoshoot in Cape Coast, Ghana. However, she has lost her Afrikan consciousness and, consequently, she denies her Afrikanity. As a result of her cultural disorientation, Mona is sent back in time to experience enslavement through her ancestor Shola to restore her Afrikan consciousness. *Sankofa* shows the centrality of Afrikan culture in enslaved Afrikan resistance. For example, Afrikan spirituality represents Afrikan consciousness, while Christianity represents whiteness in the film. However, language also plays a critical role in the representation of Afrikaness. In fact, this commentary argues that the Jamaican language represents Afrikaness in *Sankofa*.

This commentary examines the presence of the Jamaican language in *Sankofa* from an Afrocentric perspective. Afrocentricity is an intellectual perspective in which Afrikan people situate themselves as subjects within their own phenomena through historical and cultural

¹ For further discussion see Belachew 2013, Hamilton-Wray and Lynne 2016, Safford and Triplett 1983.

² The spelling ‘Afrika’ is used because of Afrikan orthography.

grounding in the Afrikan experience transgenerationally and transcontinentally.³ Africologists use Afrocentric Location Theory to assess the Afrocentric value of a work – centered or dislocated.⁴ A centered work is one in which the Afrikan author shows strong cultural and historical grounding in the Afrikan experience. An Afrikan author lacking such grounding produces dislocated work that is categorized as lynched or decapitated. A lynched work is limited by a predominance of non-Afrikan cultural and historical reference points in its approach to Afrikan phenomena, while a decapitated work is devoid of any discernable Afrikan cultural element.

This essay understands the languages of the Afrikan diaspora as Ebonics languages because they are relexified Afrikan languages as evidenced by their Afrikan grammatical continuities. In contrast, the hybridity descriptors often applied to Ebonics languages, i.e. “creole”, “dialect”, “patois”, “pidgin”, and “vernacular”, can be interpreted as lynched or decapitated terminology because they over prioritize the European lexical influence in Ebonics. More specifically, this terminology reflects either a lynched perspective that misconstrues Ebonics languages as Black remixes of European languages (e.g. Caribbean French/English Creoles, West Afrikan Pidgin English, or Afrikan American Vernacular English) or a decapitated position that dismisses their validity as legitimate languages in their own right (e.g. misinterpreting Caribbean Languages as Creoles). Thus, the Ebonics concept provides culturally appropriate nomenclature for the languages of the Afrikan diaspora.⁵

Sankofa illustrates the intrinsic relationship between language and culture which is reflective of the film’s cultural and historical centeredness. The importance of Afrikan Language

³ For further discussion on Afrocentricity see Asante 2007.

⁴ For focused discussion of Afrocentric Location Theory, see Asante 2003 and Yehudah 2015.

⁵ For a discussion on Ebonics as an Africological concept see Blackshire-Belay 1998.

is immediately evident in the namesake of the film – *Sankofa*. The concept *Sankofa* comes from the Twi verb chain *San-kɔ-fa* which can be translated as *gwaan-go-kyar(i) bak* in Jamaican which, given its genetic relationship to Twi and other Kwa languages, has verb chains as well.⁶ The deeper meaning is that one must look to their past to solve a current problem. For example, Mona's *Sankofa* experience ends her dislocation which is evidenced, for example, when she embraces her natural hair and no longer wears a blonde wig as she did in the beginning of the film. Moreover, language is a critical aspect of cultural resilience against the plantation environment. Nunu, the Akan matriarch on the plantation, speaks Twi in various social and spiritual contexts. For example, she refers to her son *Tumi* by his name, not his slave name "Joe" as everyone else on the plantation does.

The Afro-Caribbean character Shango, the namesake of the Yoruba *orisha*, only speaks in the Jamaican language. In contrast to the Hollywood tendency of casting actors who do not speak Afro-Caribbean languages naturally,⁷ Haile Gerima casted Jamaican dub-poet and political commentator Mutabaruka as Shango. Although Shango is referred to as a "West Indian", his Jamaicaness is evident because Mutabaruka is a natural speaker of the language. Shango's language, as discussed below, is a signifier of his Afrikan consciousness.

Shango exemplifies the relationship between language and culture in two ways: (1) his rejection of English and (2) his use of proverbs. Shango's opposition to the plantation is made immediately clear throughout the film. In the first debate between Shola and Shango, they differ on the issue of counter-violence. Shango supports counter-violence, while Shola is vehemently opposed to it because of her Christianization. Shango wants Shola to poison the enslaver's food,

⁶ The JLU orthography is used for Jamaican spelling in this essay.

⁷ For example, Denzel Washington as Xaiver Quinn in *Mighty Quinn* (1989) and Taye Diggs as Winston Shakespeare in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998), and the lead actors in *Cool Runnings* (1993).

but she refuses. During the argument, Shola contends that the enslaved Afrikans in the house who eat the food will also be killed. Shango rebuts:

Shango: *wel y'nuo dat iz di prais yu hafi pie fi friidom somtaim y'nuo. Y'si di niira ai get tu di wait man iz di muor yu a go iit im wat-lef an yu laiyabl fi ded. Bot no bada gwop de go tel dem y'nuo! Kaa y'nuo ef ya tel dem no fi iit it dem a go tel di wait man siem way.*

Translation: “Das how it be sometimes when you try’n a get free. **If ya’ get too close to da white man, you gon’ eat his leftovers an’ its gon’ kill you.** But don’t go tellin’ none a’ dem cuz they be snitchin’ to Massa’.”⁸

Shola: Don’t that mean you too Shango? Whatchu think I been bringin’ you all dis time? Ain’t nothin’ throwed away.

Shango: [*Stares at Shola and pauses briefly, then spits out the food that she gave him*]

From Shango’s perspective, engaging in the culture of the white man binds you to whiteness. As such, it is unsurprising that he never speaks English because it is the language of “the white man”. Moreover, Shango is a member of the “Secret Society” of enslaved Afrikans who plot rebellions and transport other enslaved Afrikans to the land of the Independent Afrikan Community (e.k.a Maroon Community) on “The Hills”.⁹ Many members of the Secret Society, including one of the leaders, speak Jamaican and they never speak English in their meetings. The presence of the Jamaican language among the Secret Society is not only a marker of Afro-Caribbean identity, but it is also associated with Afrikaness. Thus, Shango’s Afrikaness is in his language and his rejection of English is resistance against cultural suppression.

⁸ These lines have been translated in Afrikan American Ebonics. This is the translation language for Shango’s lines in the remaining examples hereafter.

⁹ The acronym “e.k.a” stands for “Eurocentrically known as”.

Afrikan proverbs, continental and diasporic, communicate general truths and knowledge through metaphor.¹⁰ Shango understands this function of proverbs as he is the one who cites the proverb of the snake and the frog:

- (1) *Di sniek gwain iit wateva in di beli a di frag.*
 “Da snake finta’ eat da frog wid all ‘at in his gut.”
- (2) *Yu nuo di sniek a go iit wat ina di frag beli!*
- (3) *Sniek gwain iit wateva iz in di beli a di frag!*

The enslaved Afrikans are the snake, while the overseers are represented by the frog. The frog seems to have the upper hand having filled its belly, but it is soon to be eaten by the snake, just as the Afrikans will eventually succeed in their rebellion against the overseers. The proverb’s meaning is reaffirmed in the following exchange between Shango and Shola:

Shango: *Shola wai yu kyaahn bi laik wan a wi? yu kyaahn kraal pan yu beli laik a sniek chruu di chriiz chruu di graas? Wan a dem die di hol a wi a go iit frag. Ye...dat iz di onli wie wi a go get wi friidom roun ya – da hol a wi hafi go iit frag. **Yu nuo di sniek a go iit wat ina di frag beli.***

Translation: “How come you can’t be like us? Why cantchu move like a snake through da trees an’ da grass? One o’ deeze days we gon’ eat frogs – das how we gon’ get free! We jus’ needa eat some frogs **like dem snakes be doin’.**”

Shola: Why dontchu make sense?

Shola cannot understand the proverb because she is still held back by her Christianization and, in turn, resistant to joining the rebellion. It is only when she joins the Secret Society and embraces Afrikan Spirituality that she understands the proverb. As victory draws near, Shango recites the

¹⁰ Dzobo 1992: 95-96, Tomlinson 2017: 29-68.

proverb (3) to the terrified overseer as the snake is about to eat the frog. Thus, Shango expresses Afrikan wisdom through the Jamaican language.

Shango's language practices show the cultural importance of language. The Jamaican language is a representation of Afrikan consciousness and resilience. Shango speaks his language and does not aspire to speak English which aligns with his resistance to whiteness. Moreover, he understands the importance of communicating truth through proverbs. His mastery of proverbs reflects the depth of his cultural consciousness. Thus, *Sankofa* locates the Jamaican language within its Afrikan context through Shango.

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