

The Economy of Love

African Wisdom for human solidarity

by Georgia Wingfield-Hayes

Whenever humans work together it seems our biggest struggle is with each other, our relationships above all, are what take the most work and care. So when I spoke to Joshua Konkankoh, a Cameroonian elder, currently in exile in Portugal, I was fascinated to find out about how he approaches this issue according to the ancient ways of his people.

Konkankoh grew up in the post war period when the previous German colonialist had been replaced by the British, in what is now Ambazonia, the anglophone region of Cameroon, currently in conflict with the ruling francophone government.

Konkankoh tells me stories from his childhood, he remembers what life was like before money. “We had no use for money, money was about exchange, but we did that with goats or chickens or any other foods. Food was the wealth of the people, people lived for growing food and farming was constant throughout the year. If we needed something, we just went to the neighbour and they gave us it, this was a community based on love. This is true solidarity, the economy of love.”

“This system of solidarity in the village meant you couldn’t do anything alone” he continues. “If you wanted to build a house then everyone would come and help. If someone died, you only had to have it announced and everyone would come and help organise the funeral. The blind and the lame lived like kings, because everybody took care of them and donated to them. People took care of those in need before themselves and their own families. This was the value that was being created, it wasn’t a piece of paper or metal, everything was for the wellbeing of everyone. People did everything with a lot of joy and received a lot of blessing from all the community as a result.”

Colonialist wanted land for tea, coffee and rubber plantations, so the concept of earning money was introduced by the Christian missionaries. Konkankoh remembers “when money was first introduced it brought division, it brought class, then the corruption started within the very custodians of our culture. People couldn’t understand why they were being asked not to grow their own food. Missionaries promised economic development but this was the enslavement of people and the removal of their food sovereignty. This is the thing that needs to be restored for people to be themselves again. What are we searching for when we want money? When you are not brought up to put the common good above your personal good, this can be difficult to understand.”

Konkankoh grew up enamoured by the white mans world and largely rejected his cultural traditions as a teenager. It wasn’t until he went to university in the capital Yaounde that he started to wonder about his ancestor roots and wisdom. “When I went to the city I was so shocked, the university was like a slum, I wondered, how do you get out of the perfection of nature into this chaos, this is when I started to realise how much I had lost.”

It wasn’t until later in life that Konkankoh had the opportunity to try and revitalise his culture heritage within the modern world. Working in youth education in Yaounde, Konkankoh and the young people recreated the spirit of his roots in Ndanifor, a word meaning ‘the mystery of the future that grows out of the ground’. “Ndanifor has always

existed” he tells me “it is the ecology of my people, a collocation of two words, Nfor meaning royalty, which for us means something that gets its life force from the earth, all things must be rooted in the earth. Nda is the palace, it represents the wisdom of the elders, who once guided us in how to live in harmony with mother earth.”

Together with the youth of the city, Konkankoh created a community garden out of a swamp in the middle of the slums. “Everyone was suffering in the slums” Konkankoh tells me, “malaria, separation from community, etc, so this garden was the new community, we had nobody instructing us how to design this new life. The first thing that emerged was the first thing that was missing, song, music and dance. So people bought into the idea of the garden and everything was just allowed to emerge. What emerges is beautiful, because it is not forced.”

The garden was a great success, none-the-less, eventually the city authorities took it upon themselves to destroy it. But the King of Bafut, in Konkankoh’s home province, having seen his work in the city offered him land for the creation of an eco-village. So in 2012 the spirit of Ndanifor returned home to Bafut.

The eco-village was built on principles of permaculture and sustainable development, but the Ndanifor way. “When we talk about community it is not like the European definition of community,” Konkankoh tells me. “It is community in the larger sense of the word including plants, animals, rivers, the unseen as well as all other beings. The ancestors and the natural resources available on the land are all considered community.”

The Ndanifor Permaculture Ecovillage went from strength to strength and was soon running Permaculture Design (PDC) and Eco-village Design Education (EDE) courses for people from all over the world. I asked Konkankoh how what he was doing in Cameroon was different from such course in Europe. “I call this regenerative education,” he tells me “we bring the old ways into it, because we have that connection. It’s all about initiation, to switch on the spirit of Ndanifor in people, which is to say switching on their collective conscious state.”

Konkankoh explains to me how it is difficult when we are brought up to put our personal good above the common good, to make this shift in how we live, hence an immersive experience like this is necessary. “This training is a healing process that turns you onto your true self. You come out believing in who you really are, because you cultivate the humility to align with universal forces rather than work against them.”

This turning on of our collective conscious state Konkankoh continues “cannot be done from individual consciousness, it has to done in an immersive community experience. We learn to give in order to receive, instead of our wanting the community to serve us. This is the economy of love.”

“What are we searching for when we want money?” he continues returning to this question, “people came to Bafut to the eco-village because they craved the warmth and love they felt in the community. For us love means solidarity, and in its purest sense is the healing of the world.”

I can’t help feeling that what Konkankoh is talking about is the missing link in our western society where capitalism encourage our obsession with the individual self. Rather than this bringing us happiness, connection and a sense of belonging as the capitalist machine

promises, it actually creates conflict and increasing loneliness. I wonder how different the world would be if we were all initiated into the spirit of Ndanifor.

Since the conflict in Ambazonia began in 2017, the community of the Ndanifor eco-village have had to leave. Konkankoh, two of his children and three colleagues from the Better-World-Cameroon team, have been supported in coming to Portugal by Tamera eco-village. This displacement is a difficult adjustment and they all hope to return home as soon as possible to carry on their work. In the meantime Konkankoh wonders if this ancient wisdom and ways of Africa might be of use here in Europe.

In the light of Covid-19, where we see communities banding together to help each other, shopping for elderly neighbours, sowing gowns for nurses, I think that perhaps the spirit of Ndanifor is there within all of us, just looking to be reawakened.