

Transcultural Aesthetics and the African Heritage in the Poetry of (Edward) Kamau Brathwaite

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Abstract: Transcultural literatures are works that transcend the socio-cultural binaries in multicultural societies, where the local and global are inextricably intermeshed and engaged with each other in a heterogeneous form and content. They often and inadvertently portray a mutually beneficial and transforming effect on cultures. Transcultural literatures also interrogate on issues about the formation of identities in a process of cross-cultural examinations, in disparate societies like the Caribbean. Edward (later Kamau) Brathwaite in his *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, deplores a plethora of African cultural elements, and further seeks to harmonise them into a Creole model to achieve a continuum. These elements are the product of his extensive and integrative experience during his 7 years stay in Africa, (Ghana, then Gold Coast). This study explores the studied text and establishes how Brathwaite deplored these cultural elements into an aesthetic idiom in Caribbean literature.

Introduction

In Kamau Brathwaite's creative and critical writings, he creates a connection between and concern with genealogy and history in Caribbean historiography. In spite of historical and physiological resemblances between African and Caribbean people, spurious doubts have been created by capricious critics and analysts of Caribbean culture, by questioning the relationship between African and Caribbean people and life-style. However, inspired by the cultural parallels between Africa and the Caribbean which he observed in Ghana, Kamau Brathwaite sets himself the mission of re-integrating Africa into the paradigm of Caribbean history, culture and academic concerns,

According to Stewart Brown, "The theme of *The Arrivants*, the trilogy of long poems which established Brathwaite's reputation as a poet, is broadly that of re-birth, re-discovery, reclamation of identity for West Indian people through an examination of their roots in the African past" (10/11). This landmark statement by Stewart Brown is definitive of the poetic interest of our poet-historian, Kamau Brathwaite who is set to do what he says: "... retracing our people's movement through space and time and the resurrection of their cultural materials" (7).

C. L. R. James's famous statement in his classic book, *The Black Jacobins* that the road to West Indian national identity and cultural and spiritual wholeness lays through Africa suggests the fundamentally dialectical role that Africa plays in the region. He affirms "that salvation for the West Indies lies in Africa, the original home and ancestry for the West Indian people" (399). This is true in literary-cultural history as in other spheres. While access to the English literary tradition is important for resources in craftsmanship in literary styles, the emergence of an identifiably West Indian literature is credited to the availability of alternative resources from Africa. The word "Africa", even though ill-defined by some Euro-centric scholars, is idealized by the culturally conscious elites that are determined to evoke an entire tradition, ranging far beyond the literary. It is in this light that Laurence Breiner affirms that "even writers who knew nothing about Africa were excited by the notion that they had an alternative to the European heritage" (143) – a tradition equally venerable and complex, but entirely different. This results in a revolution in the poetry of the region.

Dimensions of African/Diasporic Aesthetic Values

The proposition of blackness as an African-centred principle, to account for a Pan-Caribbean cultural and literary unity goes back as far as 1932, when, Pales Matos formulated his thesis of genuine *poesiaantilliana* (Antillean poetics). The concept gained increasing currency particularly since the appearance of Janheinz Jahn's *Muntu: An Outline of New African Culture*. From then, the idea of neo-African culture became wide-spread in parts of the New World. Gordon Rohlehr explains that this text, amongst others x-rays the timelessness of African experiences at home and abroad: "it was an attempt to sketch continuities in the African

experience, to suggest links between neo-African expression in the New World and that of the African Continent" (17).

Jahn posits that the essence of African culture has survived centuries of separation, and that it lingers in the souls of African descendants regardless of the distant points of the globe to which the diaspora may have taken them. He claims for instance, that in the "rumba" rhythm of Guillen's and Ballaga's poetry, we can detect a connection with religious dimension of certain African traditions. The way Blacks use words, he argues, has to do with the role played by *Nommo* (a Bantu term used for the creative word) in traditional African society.

Jahn indicates that this concept of *Nommo* in African mythology proposes that words are "the life force ... giving life to everything, penetrating everything, causing everything" (124). Within the purview of Brathwaite's creative works, he identifies his Afro-Caribbean sensitivity to the word with this African concept of *Nommo*, which he defines as "the atomic core of language ... something that is very much present in all folk cultures, all-preliterate, pre-industrial societies" (236). Jeanne Christensen credits Brathwaite's use of this concept as a cultural-retention in the New World, guiding and engendering the creative drive of all writers with an Afro-centric consciousness: "the concept of *nommow* was carried to the Caribbean (Carry-Beyond) where it was preserved in story and myth" (117).

In the light of this, those interested in the African essence, like Kamau Brathwaite, when inheriting the language from a Western education, tend to convert the European "Logos" into the African *Nommo*. In this regard, Jahn avers that "Cessaire uses European words in an African way" (52). Indeed, in his book, *Muntu*...Jahn traces most artistic expression of black people from somber notes of the blues to the sounds of African-American work songs, back to the perennially inexhaustible heritage of an African tradition. In all these postulations, Jahn insists on localizing his aesthetic search in cultural symbols coming exclusively from the Afro-Caribbean.

In the imaginations of the Afro-West Indian writers, Africa has always loomed large as a reality and an idea, and the writers' relationship to it has often been defined by a sense of origin, vision of the past and its impact on West Indian people and their place in history. The New World was created out of the bones of a bitter history; this vision of history has been ambivalent. Brathwaite on his part interweaves this vision with dreams of the glory of Africa's ancient civilizations and her kingdoms – Mali, Songhai, Timbuctu in *Rights of Passage* – with the pain of the Africans' involuntary journey to the New World.

The Caribbean poets' engagement with Africa has been both tragic and romantic. The poetic landscape has been informed by past glory, the degradation of the Middle Passage, the legacy of slavery, and the people's desire to survive. The need to locate the Caribbean experience solely in Africa continued in early twentieth century with Harold M. Telemarque's celebration of ancestral achievements:

To those
Who lifted into shape
The huge stones of the pyramid;
Who formed the Sphinx in the desert...
Who walked lithely
On the banks of the Congo ... (73).

In the poem, Telemarque pays glowing tributes to Africa's past, celebrating artistic vision, as well as physical grace; however, the celebrated ancestors remain rooted firmly on African territory only. However, Eric Roach on his part transports Canga, a hero in African folklore to the Caribbean and celebrates his wiles in the "Ballad of Canga":

He is an old Ashantee man
Full of wickedness;
Bring obeah straight from Africa;
What he curses does not bless (57).

Kamau Brathwaite apotheosises the African past and glory in the gods that inform his creative enterprise. He journeys back to an edenic Africa, where people were close to their gods, and their customs and rituals brought order and ceremony into their daily lives. In this transportation of people, customs and rituals to the New World, Brathwaite sees the humanizing influences that inform the Caribbean identity.

Kamau Brathwaite and the African Worldview

Africa assumes several symbolic levels in Brathwaite's poetry. Africa represents paradise for those whose ties to their ancestral homes were involuntarily severed, a longed-for symbol of rootedness and

homeland; it is a mother land of safety and plenty. This is astutely contrasted with the infernal hellish experience of the New World plantations.

In *Mask*, the poem “Prelude” provides an apt introduction to this compression of symbols. Africa leaps into history in the splendor of its ancient kingdoms: Songhai, Mali, Chad, Ghana, Timbuctu, Volta and Benin. At the same time, the ritual music of the drums signals moments of rebirth and beginnings:

Beat heaven
of the drum, beat
the dark leaven
of the dungeon
ground where buds are wrapped
twist-
ed round dancing roots ... (91)

Brathwaite also recalls ancient religious rites: “take the blood of the fowl/drink” (91). Africa is source, bursting with vibrancy, vitality and promise. The New World poet, cut off for so long from Africa, but wants to write himself back deep into historical time. The poet, in his poem “The Awakening” pays tribute to an Akan mythological image – “AsaseYaa, Mother of Earth” (91), and consecrates the tools of his craft to Mother Africa. Here Africa is both place and person.

With Africa as symbol of paradise, Brathwaite’s persona is thrilled by the beauty and splendor of Africa, as well as the vastness of its possibilities. In this paradise, he is transformed, and Africa is personified as the muse of his inspiration and the force informing his creativity:

And may the year
this year of all years
be fruitful
beyond the fruit of your labor:
shoots faithful to tip
juice to stem
leaves to green ... (92).

In addition to tangible survivals of African culture that out-lived the Middle Passage journey, Brathwaite recognizes a more subtle connection. It is an intuitive force, inescapably African that is an integral part of the Caribbean identity he creates. Africa in memory retains its idyllic intensity, but the real world of the Caribbean can be a dangerous one, and the poet fears not only the violence of his time, but also personal violence if he is not able to create. As he tries to integrate the vision of Africa as paradise into his rewriting of Caribbean identity, he is constantly battling past and present inhumanities. These forces of evil explode in his poem, “Kingston in the Kingdom of This World” in *Third World Poems*. In this poem, Brathwaite superimposes the dangers, the violence and the barren grounds of Kingston, Jamaica onto an African landscape that is like paradise. Like an African traditional griot, his words and actions have ancestral divine powers. The ground is sacred and blessed by the performance of ancient rituals and celebrations:

My authority was foot stamp
upon the ground
the curves the palms the dancers
my authority was nyambura: inching closer
embroideries of fingers earrings
balancers ... (53).

In reliving the history of strife and disintegration that led to the enslavement of his ancestors, Kamau Brathwaite not only recognizes his historical beginnings in the larger history of Africa, but becomes emotionally linked to the tragedies of that history. The trilogy makes this link almost un-obstructively when the poet, like an African griot, recounts the community history in *Rights of Passage*. The consciousness of the African griot appears to merge with the West Indian griot, when the emotions are recounted in *Islands*, the section of the trilogy that deals with the poet’s life in the Caribbean. The tragedy then becomes a West Indian tragedy as well, and Brathwaite integrates into his consciousness in much the same way as Shabine internalises the decimation of the Aruaks in Walcott’s *The Schooner’s Flight*.

The perpetuation of the myth of Africa is essential in the contemporary Caribbean world wrecked by violence. Out of the recalling of the past, the cultivation of “the tales of the ancestors” will come the creation of tradition and the salvation of spirit, self and community. It is in this respect that Brathwaite invokes the revival spirit in his poem “Sun Song” thus:

spirit of the blaze
red river of reflection
vermillion dancer out of the
antelope
isummon you from the trees
from ancient memories
from the uncurling ashes of the
dead
that we may all be cleansed (57).

In his essay, "The African Presence in the Caribbean Literature", Brathwaite identifies four categories of literature connected to the African experience. The first he describes as "rhetorical" (211). Here, the author knows very little of Africa, and uses Africa as a "mask", "dream" or *nomen*. He does not actively celebrate the African experience and vision. In general, he points out, "rhetorical literature is static, wishful and willful in nature. Although it betrays a significant instinct for Africa, the instinct is based on ignorance and often ... on received European notions of "darkest Africa" (214). The second is "the literature of African survival" (211). The literature of this category consciously examines African survivals in the Caribbean, but the author reneges in creating a linkage between discovered survivals (remnants of African languages, rituals and customs) and "the great traditions of Africa" (211). The third category, and the most significant, is "the literature of African expression" (211) which explores the transformation of vernacular materials into literary synthesis. This is the category that my subject-poet dwells on in his creative works. The final category which is like the third is "the literature of reconnection"(211). This type is written by Caribbean writers who have actually lived in Africa, like Kamau Brathwaite himself, and as a result try to reconnect Africa and the New World experiences. According to Brathwaite, these writers' desire is to "consciously reach out to re-bridge the gap with the spiritual heartland" (212).

In light of the self-revelatory nature of this essay, it can be described as Brathwaite's personal manifesto or critical memoir; the contemplative report of the products of his sojourn in Ghana. More than any other Caribbean writer, he is possessed by the spirit and spirits of Africa, and consciously attempts to make connections with an African experience that would explain and give validity and meaning to a Caribbean identity. In fact, in his creative works, the four categories are an integral part of his poetic visions and necessary steps in the movement towards reconnection.

Brathwaite does not limit the attempt at reconnection to the Caribbean only. He envisions a holistic diasporic connection; thus in "Blues for Billie Holiday", he links the African-American experience to Africa:

She travels far back. ex
plores ruins, touches an old immemorial
legends
everyone but herself has forgotten. She
becomes warrior and queen and keeper of the
tribe. There is no fear where she walks. ... (11).

In Black America as in the Caribbean, the colonization process had distorted and at times eliminated self and identity. In Black America and the Caribbean, this knowledge of Africa, direct, indirect or internal is powerful and creative and has the additional force of protection, the protection of the self and identity. The chasm between Black America, the Caribbean, and African must be bridged; the "ruins" explored and reconstructed in order to bring into being the New World self and identity. Brathwaite has the determined desire to rebuild the ruins.

Brathwaite is concerned with this warped perception of Caribbean people as existing outside of "race", "culture" and "history". Such a perception, based upon a denial of African experience, reinforces the position that the black person in the Caribbean is without history and ancestral roots. Realizing this, Brathwaite deftly places Africa not only in his creative and polemical essays, where it legitimately belongs, but at the centre of the aesthetic principles and cultural mythology he is developing. He artistically reclaims the links, and consciously refashions the cultural connections between Africa and the Caribbean. He transforms Orlando Patterson's protagonist in *An Absence of Ruins*, Alexander Blackman's tentative groping through the historical past into an active pilgrimage of rediscovery, a movement from negation to affirmation; for Alexander Blackman is aware, on some level, that there is a buried history waiting to be excavated, a history that goes beyond "twisted bones of crippled, mutilated black slaves"(74):

One day I shall destroy those evil
institutes

with their corridors and shelves of lies,
and
I shall burn them to the ground. I,
Alexander
Blackman, shall redeem the truth of my
heritage, of my great past, that lies
hidden
somewhere (104-05).

Brathwaite's cultivation of the myth of an African motherland offers spiritual unity and self realization. In cultivating this myth, Brathwaite confronts the pains of the Middle Passage, and slavery's tortured reality of dispossession. But attempts at dispossession are not entirely successful. Instead of a total destruction of African culture, there is a camouflage and burial of African traditions and rituals. In "Prelude", the opening poem of *Rights of Passage* Brathwaite ranges from Caribbean plantation existence, to life in the early glorious Kingdoms of Africa, to African slavery and the journey to the New World. In "Epilogue", the closing poem, the persona undergoes a magnitude of experiences as he journeys from the Caribbean to Paris, Brixton, London, New York and Rome. The full essence of this journey-motif by these personas- Brathwaite's and Orlando Patterson's- is in the full realization of the self, and identification of the soul and spirit with the extant past. In Brathwaite's persona's consciousness, there is a peculiar merger of pristine lyrical world and the everyday world of endless toil; hope is short-lived, but the struggle continues:

but my people
know
that the hot
day will be over
soon
that the star
that dies
the flamboyant carr-
cass that rots
in the road
in the gutter
will arise
rise
rise
in the butter-
flies of a new
and another morning (81-2).

To arrive at this "new morning", the experience of slavery has to be recalled; a denial of this experience results in spiritual and intellectual death. Against other Caribbean writers as Walcott, Brathwaite urges that the "stain" of slavery is an integral part of Caribbean collective consciousness, and must be named: it is an always present reminder of separation, dislocation, and isolation. This argument suffices very strongly because the slaves suffered a dual isolation: from their ancestors and their social heritage and from their community, hence an insistent need for reclamation and return. June Bobb consents to Edward Kamau Brathwaite's urge because she adjudges that:

Brathwaite sees this reclamation of communal memory as his literary and spiritual task. He must dig deeply within the Caribbean existence and consciousness to recover the past; this imagination is the medium through which the past is reclaimed and transcended. Out of the reclamation of knowledge, the understanding of the past and the transcendence of its evils will come the Caribbean identity (63-4).

Plausible evidence is identified in the Caribbean religious worship and the possession of worshippers by the *Loa* (especially *Ogun*, *Erzulie*, *Legba*). In this, Brathwaite finds the most powerful African religious experience in the Caribbean, its tenacity and potency serving to explain the lesser rites (pocomania in Jamaica and shango in Trinidad). He emphasizes the intensity of self-identification of the worshippers with divine powers as sources of psychological succor; implicitly, the same experience which overcomes the dehumanization of slavery.

Within the pantheon of *vodoun* divinities, Brathwaite takes particular interest in the Yoruba creatorgod, *Ogun* also associated with iron-working and patron of craftsmen; in *Shango*, the god of lightning, hurler of thunderbolts; and the Dahomean figure of *Legba*, lame god of the crossroads presiding over thresholds between seen and unseen worlds, between life and death. These figures occur in a variety of ways in the worship of cult groups in several Caribbean communities, and are appropriated copiously into Brathwaite's works as *agents provocateur*, creative agencies with immanent spiritual powers.

Conclusion

Overwhelmed by the vivacity and splendor of this heritage, Brathwaite in his works seeks to celebrate "... all the evidence of African culture, social organizations and religious practice persisting despite the **forcible** (my emphasis) transplant to the New World" (Bridget Jones, 93). In this way, he plays down the painful questions of pundits: has Africa endured in the Caribbean in spite of deprivations? A strong affirmative **YES!** Certainly not out of place, but an indicator and endorsement of the creativity and critiques of our poet-historian.

It is in this regard that this study strongly avers that the creative and critical works of Kamau Brathwaite forge a connection and foreground the idea of a continuum between Africa and the West Indian folk culture. Brathwaite and other poets of the region copiously deplore the infusive rhythms and language of West Indian life through uses of free verse and deep dialect of West Indians in their poetry.

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