Cultural Origins in Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s ‘Mask’ Rights and Passage

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ABSTRACT
Brathwaite’s poetry traces historical links and events that have contributed to the development of the black population in the Caribbean and is distinguished by its experimental linguistic and often multilingual explorations of African identity in the West Indies. Brathwaite’s sense of awareness, most importantly of his historical position and situation in society, finds utmost expression in his brooding, slow but progressive attempt to achieve ‘wholeness’ out of his past. This paper presents an analysis of Brathwaite’s cultural attachment to Africa, as he finds in his personal experience of excursion a prototype of the larger ordeal of his ancestors, the memory of which psychologically arouses his consciousness of rediscovery of the black race in his poems. The paper also traces Brathwaite’s in Mask and Rights of passage as he sustains an impassioned dynamic of objection to the supposition that the black man is an inferior being. It concludes that in the poems, Brathwaite has successfully attains reconciliation with his original culture, the African culture.

INTRODUCTION
The search for an African meaning in the Caribbean began earlier with writers like Marcus Garvey and Edward Blyden and later in the twentieth century with one of the foremost negritude poets, Aime Cesaire, who sustains in his work an impassioned dynamic of protest against the assumption that the black man is an inferior being. Therefore, the Caribbean writer’s obsession with the theme of Africa is an attempt ‘at exploding the myth of his inferiority’ (Hulme, 1992, p.60)

In this respect, Akpuda, (2005) describes him as the highly prolific Barbadian performance poet. Edward Kamau Brathwaite published not less than twenty poetry collections in roughly forty years. His works deal with the complex Caribbean heritage

According to Lewis, (1977) ‘Masks’ is singular in the authenticity of its recreation of the African landscape and African culture. It is also the first time in Caribbean literature that a slave descendant is made imaginatively to relieve the experience of slavery and that the slave retrace the historical evolution of his culture as it was affected successive migrations of his ancestors. History has it that no other Caribbean artist used African symbol so densely and accurately to convey his theme. Brathwaite is not however a pioneer in the treatment of the theme of Africa in Caribbean literature. But an initial effort towards accessing his place in this literature can be made seeking to understand why the Caribbean writer concerns himself with the issue of ancestry.

Edward Brathwaite was born in 1930, a professor of Comparative Literature and does not create a mother figure or a fantasy world out of Africa. Africa springs alive in his poetry through everyday customs, religious rituals, specific locations, mannerisms of speech, and historical and mythological references. So much so that in many ways – in geographical detail and its evocation of ritual, history and social code, the atmosphere and setting of ‘Masks’ is alien to the West Indian and challenges his European oriented education and his misguided impressions of Africa’s cultural acutely aware of Africa’s cultural persistence in the Caribbean.

According to Akpuda, (2005) it is the attainment and celebration of this new dawn of an authentic origin that Brathwaite attempts to achieve in ‘Masks’. With an akan proverb as epigraph – “only the fool points at his origins with his left hand”, the poet performs a necessary libatory communion with Earth Mother and Nana Firimpong for total acceptence. In “prelude”, he chants:
AsaseYaa, You, mother of earth, on whose soil I have placed my tools on whose soil I will hope I will work the year has come round again (p. 91).

And in “The making of the Drum”, there is a gradual acquisition of the paraphernalia of creativity in making the cadence of the poet’s spiritual initiation possible – the Brathwaite’s use of libation starts with a prelude of incantatory verse of prayer and invocation, the recognition of the mother earth and the beating of the drum as to invoke the spirit of the ancestors. His poetry is a celebration of Africa, goat skin, the barrel of the drum, the two curved sticks of the drummer gourds and rattles and the gong-gong because

God is dumb until the drum Speaks (97) (Akpuda, 129)

Analysis

This is a kind of review done on the works of some renowned author and on Brathwaite’s works also. King, (1980) relates how Brathwaite went on exile to Ghana. During the eight year stay, he discovered “a culture in which there is a profound relationship of individual and of the spiritual world to the community” (p. 130). The theme of Africa finds its utmost expression in “Masks” which explores the culture enslaved ancestors’ in its modern living forms in Africa, especially in the Ashanti region of Ghana. It is the poet’s pilgrimage to find his people’s cultural origins and psychological genealogy in the history of black empires, in the fashioning of ceremonial drums, in celebrations of the agricultural year in appeals to the gods for guidance, in commemorations of disasters, in invocation to the Divine Drummer to ‘Kick’ the representative persona awake. “Africa” is depicted in this segment of the poem as a land of glorious past history, a land of worthy music, dance, ancestors, customs and especially, religion.

Asein, (1971) finds that Brathwaite’s journey back to the source to assert his ancestral roots; he acquired not only the forms of traditional poetry but also the aesthetic norms and values of the African literary tradition. His intimate knowledge of the spiritual
basis of African social organization is evident in the graphic representation of religious situations, relying on specific invocations of certain gods, deities, reenacting rituals and stimulating sacrificial rites without losing the poetic vigour of his lines (11).

“Libation” opens with a prelude of incantatory verse of prayer and invocation:

Nana Firimpong take the blood of the fowl drink, take the eto, mashed plantain, that my women have cooked eat and be happy drink May you rest for the year has come around again …………………(Mask, 91- 92).

This kind of Poetry is both secular and religious. “The making of the Drum” concerns the sacrifices that make a sacrament of ordinary objects in African life “The Barrel of the Drum” is a celebration of the wood from which the drum is made:

Hard duro wood with the hollow blood that makes a womb……………..You dumb adom wood will be bent, will be solemnly bend, belly wounded with fire, wounded with tools (Masks, 95)

“The Skin” is an incantation about the goat whose skin will be used for the drum:

First the goat Must be killed and the skin Stretched bless you, four-footed animals, who eats rope, Skilled ……………..(Masks, 94)

The two curved sticks of the Drummer Gourd and Rattles, The Gong-Gong, are among the various musical objects given a religious significance. “Atumpan” has an awakening motif. Brathwaite gives evidence of his mastery of the traditional speech, mode of prayer and invocation as he invokes the spirit of the tree:

FuntumiAkoretweneboa Akore Spirit of Cedar  Spirit of the Cedar tree TweneboaKodia ………….We are addressing you Ye re Kyerewo Listen let us succeed (‘Masks’, 99).

Here, Brathwaite addresses himself to the spirit of the wood and not to a physical entity. The next section of the poems is “The path-finders”, poems that treat African heroes and places of the past. Before he proceeds to celebrate the people in sequence that is reminiscent of the epic catalogue, Brathwaite announces the sectional theme:
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Summon the emirs, kings of the desert horses caparisoned, beaten gold bent, archers and Ciers, Porcupine arrows, bows bent; recount now the gains and the losses; Agades, Sokoto, El Hassan dead in his tent, the skills and the brasses, the slow weary text (“Mask”, 102).

This reveals that African history has been a betrayal of brother, and it is discovered in the Poems that African people are partly responsible for their own enslavement by the Western world. “Path-finders” treats the exploits of heroes and features of the important places of the past, like Chad and Volta. The poems are in form of praise songs. Brathwaite makes a wide range of references to such African empires as Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Benin, Congo, and Chad, such African towns as Axum, Timbuctu, Ougadougou, Takoradi and Kumasi; such African personalities as Chaka, Osai Tutu; such African gods as Ogun, damballa, Olodumare, Tano; the tropical Rain Forest; the fauna and flora of Africa, its history, legends, myths and more. All the things that Brathwaite has been mentioning show his knowledge of them and point to his cultural origin and root.

Rights of passage

Braithwaite physical and literary excursion into African is a resemblance of the isrealites’ exodus. This is clearly depicted in the epigraph to “Right of passage”

If I forget you, o Jerusalem, Let my right hand wither; let my tongue cleave to the roof Of my mouth. If I do not remember you; If do not see set Jerusalem above my highest joy [ii]

The identification of the poet with Africa is the focus of the first part of the trilogy. The title “Right of passage” indicates the anthropological term ‘ ’rites de passage” which can be seen as a transition between one condition to another. Therefore the “Rights of passage” signifies a yearning by the poet for identification with his African origin. It also becomes a semiotic of transformation in Braithwaite’s consciousness of his own identity. Even though Braithwaite lived as an alien in Africa [Ghana], he henceforth acknowledges his African blood and desires to be identified with it. This is perhaps a psychological
transition and it is based on this that the meaning of the epigraph is derived from “exodus”. This condition is marked by a denunciation of the European mind referred to as ‘Babylon’ [The journal of pan African studies]. In “wings of a dove” Brathwaite mirrors his African consciousness in the temper of the Rastafarians:

And I Rastafar –I In Babylon’s boon - - - - - Cry my people shout: Down down White Man - - - - Dem mock Dem kill Dem an ‘go Back back To the black Man I an’Back back To Af-Rica.

Thus, in “wings of a dove”, the return – to- Africa ideal of the poet is not confined to his individual self but to the entire people of African descent. With this new awareness of going-back-to-africa, Braithwaite’s “Right of passage” depicts the unfortunate experiences of the past, and he asks the black people to evolve a new, wholesome image:

Build now the new Villages, you Must mix spittle with dirt - - - - - -

Mud walls will rise in the dawn Welled cities Arise - - -Grand, God
A clear release from thieves

In “Tom”, there is an assumption of the personality of African and a concern about the future of African children both in African and in the Caribbean:

Let me suffer Nothing To remain me now of my lost children But let them Rise O man O God O dawning let my children Rise in the path

Of the morning up and go for thon the road of the morning [13-14]

For Brathwaite, the implication of these denunciations resides in his search for a religion, which is basically African in conception to replace the children religion. Ultimately, for Brathwaite, the rejection of western value is a sure step towards his affirmation of an African meaning. It may not be an otiose task to comment in passing the factors surrounding the theme of Africa as a dominant trope in Braithwaite’ poetry.
His source of inspiration for this African exploration can be found in his three-way journey from the west indies to England where he lived as a student, then to African [Ghana] where he worked for upwards of eight years and back to the west Indies. Therefore he finds in this personal experience of excursion a prototype of the larger ordeal of his ancestors, the memory of which psychologically arouses his consciousness.

Indubitably, Brathwaite sets out to explore the theme of rediscovery of the black race in his poem. To this end, he progresses through a series of dominant themes. The dominant ones however, are themes of Africa diaspora. For instance:

*E-Gypt in AF-Rica MesopaTamia Merothe Nile Silica*

*Glass And brittle SaHara, TimBuctu, Goathe hill ofAhafo, winds*

*Of the Ni-Ger, Kumasi and river Down the Coiled congo And down*

*That black river - - - - - - - - - - - - - (‘Right of passage’, iii 35)*

The above lines show the migration of African people from Egypt to West Africa, where they were eventually sold into slavery. The disjointed nature of this poem has a geographical poetic effect; it is meant to show the black people are scattered all over the world.

**Criticism**

This paper will not be complete without looking at some scholarship criticisms on Brathwaite and his poetry. Dash, (1970) comments that ‘Masks’ is an innovation of serenity and reverence totally absent in the violated New World. It is tempting to locate Brathwaite’s vision of Africa as part of the mythical, nostalgic picture evident in such poets as Senghor, to cast Brathwaite in the role of the prodigal son returning to his roots. However, it is significant to note the section is entitled “Masks” and not “Africa” and to see the extent to which we witness something more complex than blind romanticizing of the ancestral past (p.219).
More so, Ajayi (1991) shows that Brathwaite’s Poetry is thus a rewriting of Caribbean history in its socio-economic dimensions for he knows that ‘the sea is a divider. It is not a life-giver. The evocation of Black ritual cults of Legba, Ananse, Ogun is an instance of Brathwaite’s substituting principle, for the Black Pantheon is assumed to be capable of restoring ‘Uncle Tom’ to his symbolic position or potency (205).

Again, Stewart Brown (1995) comments on Brathwaite’s Poetry as he asserts that his historical imagination as mediated through his poetry, is informed by his experience of living for many years in Ghana, and on his return to the Caribbean, by his recognition of the submerged presence of Africa in the cultures of the region. Much of his work has been a kind of reclamation of that African inheritance, a reclamation that has inevitably involved a process of challenge and confrontation with the laments of the mercantilist/colonial culture which overlaid and often literally oppressed the African survivals (126 – 127).

Apparently, the issue of ‘Africa’ as a co-text in West Indian literature has received much attention among scholars and critics. Olorintoba, (1994) in her essay, “Literature of the Black Diaspora” contents that in West Indies a literature of transplantation is encountered, that is, a literature highlighting the struggles for emancipation and the yearning for a reunion with the roots – “a yearning, which again in the arts takes the form of the employment of troops from African cultural founts” (139).

Perhaps Oloruntoba’s claim is a reference to the view of Ashcraft et al (1989) that Brathwaite regards a return to African roots as pertinent to contemporary West Indian. They state that “the West Indian Poet and historian Brathwaite proposes a model which while stressing the importance of the need to privilege the African connection over European, also stresses the multi-cultural syncretic nature of the West Indian reality” (P.35).

In “Masks”, Brathwaite makes use of the methods of traditional African poetry which account for his shifting personae and consequent modulation of tones and of the voice which is at once private and public. The more formal inheritance from African Poetry includes his adaptation to the praise Poetry, the lament, the dirge, incantatory
verse, the curse and the abuse. Samuel Asein (1971) identifies the following lines as traditional (African) incantatory verse and compared them with the overture in Christopher Okigbo’s ritual poem, “Heavensgate”.

\[ I \text{ who have pointed my face to the ships, the winds anger, today have return, eating time like a mud fish; who was lost, tossed among strangers, waves, have returned where the stones give lips to the water:} \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ (136 – 137) \]

One major thematic strand that runs through the ‘Rights of passage’ of Edward Braithwaite, is a guest for identity, an attempt to come to terms with a past that was overwhelming in itself “and still remains overwhelming in its undesirable intrusion into the present”[Romanus Egudu]. Braithwaite’s main artistic preoccupation is to achieve ‘wholeness’ through poetic reconstruction. For him, therefore, the eye must be free/seeing, an attempt to retrieve his world through his poetic vision. The importance of Africa in West Indian writing cannot be overestimated, either as providing alternative metaphors of cultural difference or as a fully developed Negritude [Richard David]. According to Kole Omotoso, African people in the Caribbean suffer two major psychic wounds:

They have been violently taken away from their ancestral homes through conspiracy of their own people and the white slavers and thus been permanently deprived of the revitalizing effect of their home culture, something which the Europeans of the Caribbean depended upon to survive their sojourn and the Indians looked back to in exile........ The second damage stemmed from the denying of the values and worthiness of African culture and consequent on-going denigration of continental African culture.

The impacts of these psychic wounds have been so profound that their consciousness has over the centuries been afflicted by the crisis of identity. It is this very crisis that basically informs the creative imagination of the average Caribbean artist [coulthard]. All kinds of cleavages along the lines the race, wealth, class and political
affiliation have caused the alienation felt by the African people in the Caribbean. It should be stressed that the alienation felt by the African in the Caribbean has become the burden of the west Indian writer attempting to capture the complexity of his society. in doing this, as one would expect, there are bound to be areas of common interest among the writers, just like there are dissimilarities among them. But one thing they have in common is the need felt by the west Indian writer to create and redefine the essence of his /her black colour and west Indian experience, the need to capture the reality of the people who seem rootless.

**Conclusion**

“Masks” is indeed a religious poem put to cultural, political and psychotherapeutic purposes on behalf of the whole people. “Masks” manifests itself in a radical and profound sympathy, both psychological and artistic, with the African culture. Nothing signifies this better than the very style of the volume – the grave measured and meditative tone of the poetry. “Masks” celebrates the life Brathwaite found in African, particularly among the Akan of Ghana. Africa is depicted in this segment of the poem as a land of glorious history, a land of worthy music, dance, ancestors, customs and especially religion. Many of the slaves and their descendants have always nurtured a strong emotional relationship with Africa, a pride in African ancestry, and an awareness of the oneness of peoples of African descent all over the world. I recall the story of KuntaKinte of “Roots”, whose struggle to pass on his memory of Africa to his daughter Kizzy, was refused and denied him by the plantation white masters. And in spite of torture to give up his African name which though he forcefully gives up at last, but he still remains it in his memory till his death in the New world.

Indeed, these links have been and continue to be lived out through the practice of traditional African customs and, in some cases, through memories of family history traced back to Africa. But these feelings have more often been voiced than committed to writing because so many of the people who felt this way were non-literate, and therefore
unacquainted with the official European languages to express themselves in print and too low in the social scale to be in a position to have their opinions effectively heard.

‘Rights of Passage’ is a poem of protest in which Brathwaite tries to recreate the past and examine it to build a better tomorrow for his people. He is indeed an example of a poet in an emerging literature operating within the European avantgarde technique attitude, which can be adopted to express the cultural concern of a new notion of the third world (Ayo Kehinde).

Given this unified African heritage and shared commonality of the African historical experience, African and West Indian writers appear to consciously examine their African heritage in the literatures of both areas. Brathwaite’s sense of awareness, most importantly of his historical position and situation in society, finds utmost expression in his brooding, slow ut progressive attempt to achieve ‘wholeness’ out of his past. His Ghanian experience, no doubt had opened his eyes to this possibility.

Slowly, slowly, ever so slowly, obscurely, slowly but surely, during the eight years that I lived there, I was coming to an awareness and understanding of community, of cultural wholeness, of the place of the individual within the tribe, in society. Slowly, slowly, ever so slowly, I came to a sense of identification of myself with these people, my living divines. I came to connect my history with theirs, the bridge of my mind now linking Atlantics and ancestor, home land and heartland (Brathwaite).

Finally, “Masks”, like Brathwaite’s other poems, is interspersed with prayers and invocations for success, for courage, and for spiritual aid. According to Lewis, hope is still the keynote even after the slave descendant is brutally exposed to the truth of his identity:

Firm fingers of shadow unmask me, my navel string screams. (12)

He learns here that time has bred relentless change – change which has always been such a disturbing fact of human existence. The slave descendant is not an African in the same sense that his slave ancestor was. This is why the descendant screams with fear and anguish and disappointment. Yet, the descendant’s inquiry into his past has given him a sense of belonging. Thus he takes comfort from recognizing that his “navel string”,

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his cultural mother is Africa: for African culture carried across the seas remains an integral part of the black man’s attitudes, speech, religion, rhythmic sense, family structure and domestic habits; and this culture has been strong enough to influence that of other peoples with whom black people have come into contact. But in order to realize his cultural base in Africa, the expatriate black has consciously acquaint himself with Africa – its history and development, its way of life.

References


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