



## AFRICANITY IN THE LITERATURE OF BLACK DIASPORA: KAMAU BRATHWAITE CONTEXTUALIZED

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### **Abstract:**

The African landscape, history and culture are severally identified in the literature of Black Diaspora as vital features of black aesthetics. From the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries, the word 'Africa' in the West Indies had mythic connotation for a traditional society in the far remote past. It gives an impression of an edenic home, lost at the period of Slave Trade. The implications of this interpretation convoke several notions of different conceptual worlds within the Caribbean Archipelago to different writers in the region. Kamau Brathwaite, on his part, celebrates this African world as part of his romantic identification with, and psychic integration with the world of his ancestors. Through this process of creative re-visitation to his ancestral past, the poet points to a valid and concrete tradition that speaks volumes of humanity's origin and an evolution of a generic culture and tradition that transcends the chronological dating. Before the advent of slavery, Africans had an enduring living culture that withstood the incendiary advances of colonialist's powers. These are the elements that this research seeks to establish in the poetry of Kamau Brathwaite.

**Keywords:** Africinity, archipelago, edenic

### **1. Introduction**

This discovery of Africa as explored in creative works, comes to the deracinated West Indian as a defensive weapon (as in Negritude), a consciousness of an alternative force; of race not simply as a mark to bear, "*but as a mark of substantial heritage*" (Breiner, 155). This awareness of Africa, and reflection on its implication both as a burden (racial implication), and as a positive value, first comes to West Indians through their exiles – intellectuals, soldiers, workers, etc. Of topical significance here is an understanding of the different functions for which Africa is invoked by West Indian writers.

Different West Indian writers perceive Africa from the stand-point of their peculiar geographical/cultural understanding. Laurence Breiner presents four distinguishing functions that serve to establish the contextual relationship of African landscape to the literary inquest of the West Indian writer:

- *“Africa as historical past”* (156). The Africa of this era is of the noble and heroic periods – a Golden Age before the Middle Passage. The virtues of this age are celebrated by Negritude and Harlem Renaissance writers, and further nourished by the philosophies of Pan-Africanism, Black Power Movement and Rastafarianism.
- *“Africa as ideal elsewhere (an alternative world)”* (156). This creates an edenic haven in the minds of West Indians; meant to espouse a world of peace, and Arcadian in the integrity of its civilization.
- *“Africa as real elsewhere (a separate place with its own history)”* (156). Africa here is a place with its own historical destiny, of great interest to West Indians. This is the objective notion of Africa as a distinct place and people with which West Indians share some socio-cultural affinities and ties in the present. Such perception of Africa is at the heart of Brathwaite’s *Masks*. This image of Africa is reaffirmed by Abiola Irele’s assertion that Brathwaite presents *“Africa as a material reality rather than an imaginative or ideological construct”* (153).
- *“Africa-in-the-Caribbean”*, an assemblage of cultural survivals and affinities (156). This is the most salient fact that seeks to affirm the overwhelming presence of African survivals in the Caribbean, like habits, styles of speech, beliefs and behaviour, all variously integrated into the indigenous culture and life pattern in the Caribbean. All these, observably, make Africa come as a significant element in Caribbean life.

From about the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the word ‘Africa’ in the West Indies had a mythic connotation for a traditional society in the remote past. It gives an impression of an edenic home, lost at the period of the Slave Trade. The implication of this mythic interpretation convokes several notions of different conceptual worlds within the Caribbean archipelago.

## 2. Concepts and Visions of an African *Forgotten*

The retention and existence of African cultural carry-overs in the Caribbean in spite of repressive social, political and economic policies detrimental to these cultural institutions, is indicative of the resilience of culture to withstand hegemonic control. The expression of the sense of cultural understanding goes beyond the realm of political rhetoric. African cultural images are integrated into Afro-Caribbean aesthetics as an identification of cultural revival and wholeness.

Emmanuel Obiechina describes this as *“cultural nativism”* (25). The importance of this creative expression of cultural products in the literature of Black Atlantic is established by Houston A. Baker Jr. in his analyses of the criticisms related to writers’ commitment to the black aesthetics:

The corpus of Black American literature might be defined as that body of written works crafted by authors consciously (even, at times, self-consciously) aware of the long-standing values and significant experiences of their culture. By embodying these experiences and values in expressive form, the writer provides one means through which those who share the same culture can recognize themselves and move towards fruitful self-definition. The literature contains deep aspects of the culture, and its Black audience actively benefits from its reflection of the most humane values of a singular whole way of life (48).

Kamau Brathwaite, a poet from Barbados has assiduously employed this medium, and explored the cognitive value of culture as 'a move towards fruitful self-definition'. This informs Charles Bodunde's summation that "... *this poet, like many of his contemporaries among the Caribbean literati, is motivated to envision and capture the African world by his enthusiasm for cultural recovery and reaffirmation ...*" (20). Davidson Nichol, an anthropologist cites classical examples of remnants of Africanhood in the Diaspora:

*"In Haiti, Africa gods were transferred into Roman Catholic saints in Voodoo ceremonies, in Surinam, traces of the Temne of Sierra Leone and the Ashanti of Ghana remain; in a remote village of Trinidad, an old black lady reminisced about her grandmother in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who danced in the rain during thunderstorms and sang praises to Shango, the Nigerian Yoruba god of lightning and thunder."* (179)

The African landscape, history and culture are severally identified in the literature of black diaspora as vital features of black aesthetics. Brathwaite celebrates this African world as part of his romantic identification with, and psychic integration with the world of his ancestors. In *Masks*, Brathwaite evokes images that typify the topography and architectural features of African history and its landscape. In the poem "Timbuctu", he identifies the "world of walls" (1978:106), surrounded by "plains of dust" (106).

In another poem entitled "Ougadougou", disharmony pervades the entire scenery. Here we encounter hellish damnation: "red whispering walls" (104) which spit fire, and undermine protection from tropical heat. Furthermore, we are also confronted with the sounds of walls falling, and children crying in fear of the conflagration:

*"The heat  
Was before us; mirages danced  
In its silver; our brittle walls  
Crumbled, flat walking roofs*

*Tumbled; red tongues  
Licked grass from the streets'  
Children screamed, women ran,*

*Crackled sparks' eyes crashing to ashes;  
Goats butted and turned, blinded; horses  
Stamped"* (104).

In "Timbuctu" the poet decries the ruinous deprivations of Africa by unconscionable exploiters of her human resources. Here the poet uses the images of dust replicated severally to emphasise the damning of Africa to a wasteland:

*“And what wealth here, what  
riches, when the gold returns  
to dust, the walls*

*we raised return again  
to dust; and what sharp winds,  
teeth’d with the desert’s sand,  
Rise in the sun’s dry  
Brilliance where our mosques  
Mock ignorance, mock pride,  
Burn in the crackled blaze of time,  
Return again to whispers, dust.” (106)*

These cities, Timbuctu and Ougadougou, represent the desecration of Africa, and are symbolic of the tragical history of forced emigration that was instigated by slavery.

In the same vein, Brathwaite celebrates Africa as the cultural provenance of their Caribbean heritage through the expression of the mythological, folkloric and material imageries that are richly endowed in the African world. In the poem “Prelude” in *Masks*, the mytho-cultural provenances are the elements that are the signal feature of life in Africa. One of such cultural elements is ancestors’ worship, a metaphysical feature of religious life that Brathwaite subjects to poetic transformation. Within the realm of ritual recreation, he reflects on the spiritual link between the living and the dead. In the poem, earth is the metaphor for the spiritual force that binds the terrestrial beings and the spiritual forces:

*“Nana Firimpong  
Once you were here  
Hoed the earth  
And left it for me  
Green rich ready  
With yam shoots, the  
Tuberous smooth of cassava.” (91)*

The images and totems symbolizing ancestral sacrificial worship and rituals are copiously invoked also:

*“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 round  
again.” (91)*

Brathwaite draws allusion to Asase Yaa, the Akan earth goddess. She is to be placated to rejuvenate the earth to yield bumper harvest:

*“Asase Yaa,  
You, Mother of Earth, / on whose soil  
I have placed my tools  
on whose soil  
I will hoe  
I will work  
the year has come round  
again;”*

*“thirsty mouth of the dust  
is ready for water  
for seed.” (91-92)*

Brathwaite further creates allusive prayer-modes that record the worship of Asase Yaa, earth goddess through propitiatory rites:

*And may the year  
this year of all years  
be fruitful  
beyond the fruit of your labour:  
shoots faithful to tip  
juice to stem  
leaves to green;*

*and may the knife  
or the cut-  
lass not cut*

*me; roots blunt,  
shoots break,  
green wither.” (92)*

Besides the rituals and other processes, Brathwaite expresses poetic adoration on the instruments which are used to embellish these processes.

The drum is one of Africa’s most veritable and common instruments used in religious worship and secular ceremonial entertainment. In the poem, “The Making of the Drum”, Brathwaite enunciates the phases in the making of an African drum, and celebrates this vital

instrument with cultural innuendoes, as a vital artifact. Drawing from the drummer's invocation of the sacred components of the drum, Brathwaite addresses the animal from which the skin was taken for the drum as a ritual archetype in the sacred communion between man and the gods:

*"Bless you, four-footed animal, who eats rope,  
skilled  
upon rocks, horned with our sin;  
stretch your skin, stretch*

*it tight on our hope;  
we have killed  
you to make a thin  
voice that will reach*

*further than hope  
further than heaven, that will  
reach deep down to our gods where the thin  
light cannot leak, ... "* (94)

The cultural significance of this poem rests in what Bodunde describes as *"its evocation of an oral cultural practice in which the drum transmits poetry instead of serving as a mere accompaniment"* (27). This is a novel concept in what the poet calls *"Dub-poetry"*. Kamau Brathwaite describes dub poetry as *"one of the most exciting developments to emerge from the explosion of grassroots artistic/intellectual activity in the late 1960s and 1970s"*. (Qtd. By Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh, 22). It is pertinent to observe here that despite the criticisms that some academics have against dub poetry as a literary genre, it enjoys a wide acceptability amongst the elite class with its credit in the use of *"nation language"*. Consuella Bennett consents that *"this art form has the power to raise our sensitivity to the social ills and is expressed in "nation language" ....* (163).

Perhaps, the heritage of drum-based poetics is shared by many more African-heritage poets than we so far have recognized. Wilfred Cartey makes a substantial case for the widespread use of drum-poetics among the Negritude poets from Africa and the Caribbean. Cartey's words are clearly applicable to the work of Kamau Brathwaite, not only in *Masks*, but in much of his later poetry as well. He says that:

*"The poet will not only summon the word, ..., he turns to the rhythm of the drums and melodies of the flute .... For the poet, the drum becomes an ancient heirloom, resurrecting memories .... It not only awakens emotions, but has power to infuse vitality and movement into lifeless form."* (20/21)

It may be pertinent to surmise that the sounds and rhythms generated by drum-based poetry do not die with each performance, nor with the performer. They do linger on as echoes and memories that evoke various times, place and people in history – enduring aspects of the history we know, and the world of our dreams. It is also obvious that because the rhythms and

sounds of the drums touch our total being, their symbolic value transcends space and time. This informs Anyidoho's view that *"the single drumbeat is often an echo of the past, a record of the present, a dream of the future. It activates the memory of humankind and calls up visions of future time"* (49). It is important that we remember that African drum-poetics is an essential creative and analytical model for Kamau Brathwaite's works.

Marina Maxwell in her review of *Masks*, links the imaging of the poem "The Making of a Drum" to its autochthonous African origin, when she avers that in the first section of the poem, "The Skin", Edward Brathwaite examines the wider implications of African myth which lie behind the ritual act of the killing of a goat to make the skin of a drum. She points out that *"in Africa, the goat is considered a barren animal. Song of a Goat, a play by the Nigerian playwright, J. P. Clark, points to the theme. So, the barren areas of our lives must be killed and the skin of our very existence stretched"* (qtd by Gordon Rohlehr, 122).

The trilogy is held together partly by a string of recurrent imagery. There are repeated references throughout to the drum, a central symbol of African culture. Drum is the very first word of the *The Arrivants*, and it is there at the end in "Jouvert" *"God is dumb/ until the drum/ speaks"* (97). Wrenched from Africa, the New World Blacks still remember the talking drum, *"Atumpan talking and the harvest branch- les"* (13) the angry man in "Folkways" feels *"like a drum with a hole / in its belly"* (31), an image later associated with Tom, in whose cabin there is *"A rusted / bucket, hold kicked into its / bottom (70). The Rastafarian in "Wings of a Dove" summons us to "beat dem drums / dem"* (44). The poet-persona in the 'Prelude' of *Masks* invokes creative power: *"Beat heaven / of the drum, beat"* (91).

It is not surprising that the drum plays a major role in *The Arrivants*. At the beginning of *Masks*, we share in a ritual of creative preparation in "The Making of the Drum" (94-97). In the poem, Brathwaite merges the ritual and symbolic functions of the drum in this work dedicated to the African narrative of origins and journeys, Old World history, and New World reality. This point is corroborated by June Bobb, indicating that *"the drum in African culture goes beyond the revolutionary and religious functions. It symbolizes origins..."* (182). The poem gives a graphic detail of the mechanical process of the ritual of the creation of the drum, but underlying the process is the deeply spiritual yearning for reconnections to the African deities:

*"we have killed  
you to make a thin  
voice that will reach*

*further than hope  
further than heaven, that will  
reach deep down to our gods where the thin  
light cannot leak, where our stretched*

*hearts cannot leap."* (94)

The first part of this poem entitled "The Skin" certifies the ritual process of cleansing before the ordinate stage of celebrating the components of the drum.

In his poem, "Wake", Brathwaite recounts and invokes the mourning rituals of wake-keeping in African cultural life. Wake-keeping is an all-night ceremony to honor the dead. Brathwaite's "Wake" honors the African ancestors and their Caribbean descendants. The poet appeals to the ancestors, and the "ninth night" (1993:210) ceremony of the dead is used to intensify the appeal:

*"out of the dark I will call you  
my warned dead  
Ibo cane-cutter  
priest of my silent bread*

*bless me with shadows  
white calico of mutters;  
mother me with words,  
gem, spoken talisman of your broken tongue."* (210)

The poem "Wake" offers both a literal and symbolic illustration of the interplay between Old World and New World, between Africa and West Indies. On the one hand, 'Wake' as an African burial rite is on a literal sense an African retention in the West Indies, a fact which validates Brathwaite's choice of it as an aspect of heritage and a medium for exploration. In a major sense, however, it functions as a process of transition into the world of the dead; this gives grounds for a metaphorical interpretation – delineates psychic destitution and spiritual poverty.

In its West African connotations, the principle behind the ritual relates to the concentric order of three worlds (the living, the dead, and the unborn) and the continuous spiritual link between them. Thus, more than a medium of transition, the rite is also a mode of reconnection, a means by which the dead world and its life- and spirit sustaining force can intermingle with the living world to its renewed vitality and advantage. Brathwaite bemoans:

*"may your journey now be straight going  
may your road be a peaceful one*

*and on arrival  
tell our never-returning ancestors of old  
that now they have left us  
the land is unbearably dry  
let there be rain*

*tell our never-returning grandfathers of old  
that the houses are damp, the verandas are cold  
with the wind weeping in from the sea  
that the hedges are dusty, that the tubes of the cane are dry  
let there be rain."* (209).



Commenting on the autochthonous origin of the wake ritual in the Caribbean, Gordon Rohlehr inscribes it to its African origin having been transported to the New World in the slavery era: “transported across the Atlantic, African burial customs survived throughout the archipelago of the Caribbean, where the wake was originally a ceremony to prepare the spirit of the dead for a new existence among the “invisibles””(240).

In a characteristically rhetorical tone to accentuate the fossilized presence of the wake tradition in the Caribbean, Edouard Glissant reiterates Rohlehr’s opinion positing an African communal spirit at burial ceremonies. He probes:

*“Is there any trace, any vestige of African beliefs in what we feel about death? The tradition of the wake, (my emphasis) where we drink and tell tales, ..., where we imitate the dead person and laugh at his weaknesses while in the house the family keeps vigil, ... does this tradition contain African survivals? .... Even today a burial is for us a “national event”, and one of the most listened to broadcasts on the radio is the one that gives the death announcements, intended for those who wish to pay their final respects to their loved ones. (59-60)*

In the poem “Atumpan”, Brathwaite ‘resurrects’ the traditional Akan drum-poetry of the “Awakening” ceremony. *Atumpan* is defined in the glossary of the *The Arrivants* as “talking drums” (272). Gordon Rohlehr attests that “by using the actual poetry of the *Atumpan*, Brathwaite is able to place in historical context a real cultural retention ...” (127) in the New World.

At the “Awakening” ceremony, the *Atumpan* is sounded and prayer – drum prayer – made simultaneously by the court drummer – *Odomankoma kyerema* – at 4 O’ clock in the morning of every Aday festival of the Akan people. Aday festivals are celebrated on every twenty-one days, and are occasions celebrated in remembrance of and paying homage to mythic god-like ancestors.

In African societies, ancestors-worship is a valid and serious feature of our cultural life. It is based on the philosophy of the concentric cycle of life between the living, the dead and the unborn. Brathwaite’s aesthetic here is firmly established on the belief of the various features of Africanoid (elements that depict an African-centred perspective and analytical stream) oral traditions. This is in recognition of the ancestors, and an act of reverence to them as primal creators and fathers. Among the Akan, the name *Odomankoma* is Sky-God-Creator. It is used as the subject onto whom the prayers in the poem are offered. He is a potentate and titular father of the race.

The drum-poetry of the “Awakening” ceremony is appropriate here because the poet appeals to the primal ancestors for success on his new enterprise of the creation “... of a new language and consciousness, grounded on a reclaimed knowledge of the continuity of African oral traditions in the New World” (Rohlehr, 126). In the poem, Brathwaite appeals to *Odomankoma* – “we are addressing you/ ye re kyere wo/.../ listen/ let us succeed/ listen/ may we succeed” (99).

This address and prayer crave for creative ascension, authenticity and fulfillment. The creative enterprise seeks to redress the complicity of the Caribbean’s psychic detour, that he may appreciate the need for, and value of his society’s regeneration.

### 3. Conclusion

Kamau Brathwaite's poetry is created from the rubrics of the devastated past of Africa. It forms the matrix of a testament of atonement for the evils of African elites who aided and abated the slave trade of their kith and kins, and the subsequent destruction of African society. Brathwaite succeeds in his poetry to re-envision Africa from mythic creation of the colonialist's writers to a material reality, rather than an imaginative construct. All these developments make Africa come as a significant element in Caribbean life.

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