UNIT 4 (EDWARD) KAMAU BRATHWAITE-I

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this unit are (a) to introduce Edward Kamau Brathwaite as a poet, historian and cultural commentator, (b) to look at his early poetry especially from the trilogy The Arrivants. The poems will be discussed in the context of Brathwaite's historical and cultural analysis included in Roots, a representative selection comprising essays from the 1950s to the 1980s. For understanding Brathwaite's poetry you must pay special attention to his use of culture-specific concepts from Africa and the Caribbean, his use of nation language and the oral narrative tradition he incorporates in it.

4.1 BARBADOS

Barbados, the island where Brathwaite was born in 1930, is the most easterly of the Caribbean island chain and is located some eighty miles out from that chain, alone in the Atlantic. It had been deserted by indigenous Carib Indians by the time the English arrived in 1625. The first African slaves were brought to it in 1627. Because the island is relatively small and its open terrain allows access to all parts of the country it had been assumed that the slaves were completely engulfed by the dominant European culture and lost all traces of their African past. Brathwaite comments on this assumption in the preface to Mother Poem. Barbados is the "most English of West Indian islands but at the same time nearest, as the slaves fly, to Africa. Hence the Protestant Pentecostalism of its language, interleaved with Catholic bells and kumina." Kumina is a ritual ceremony of singing, drumming, dancing and spirit-possession brought over from Africa to the New World by the slaves. Its prevalence attests to the continuance and resilience of African culture in Barbados. Racially the island is one of the most demographically homogeneous territories in the Caribbean, with more than ninety per cent people of African descent and the rest of European or non-African mixed ancestry.

The evolution of Brathwaite's poetic career has often been linked to that of his country. At the time when Brathwaite was growing up Barbados was still an English colony. Brathwaite left for England in the 1950s to study History at Pembroke
College, Cambridge University. He worked in Ghana for eight years and came back to join as Professor of History at the University of West Indies, Jamaica. Apart from his childhood and adolescent years he has never stayed at Barbados for an extended period of time and yet the sense of belonging to Barbados permeates his work. So it is only appropriate to view the appearance of his first major volume of poetry, Rights of Passage (1967), a year after the island's independence, as events reinforcing each other, the poetry marking an independence of language. The first volume of his second trilogy, Mother Poem, published in 1977 has been called by the poet as being all about “my mother, Barbados.” The landscape of this region-Barbados is a coral island with an underground water supply, filtered through the porous limestone coral rock - is detailed in the opening poem of this collection:

The ancient water sources of my island
echo of river, trickle, worn stone,
the sunken voice of glitter inching its pattern to the sea,

memory of form, fossil, erased beaches high above the eaten
boulders of St. phillip.
my mother is a pool. (Mother Poem, hereafter M, 3)

A recent collection in which the sense of being a part of and yet apart from his native land is thematised is titled Barabajan Poems (1492-1992) (1994). Mixing genres the collection includes poetry, prose, proems (prose poems), the letter, the footnote, autobiography and bibliography. It includes selections of Bajan poetry and hence can also be called an anthology of sorts. But while it is a celebration of Bajan creativity it is also a severe indictment of the recent history of the island which has made it a tourist paradise at the expense of its inhabitants. One instance of this is the connection the poet makes between the building of golf courses, which he calls golf “curses,” and the serious drought which has prevailed in Barbados over the past few years (Savory 756).

Despite the growing menace of tourism and increasing Westernisation, the persistence of Afro-Caribbean culture becomes a cause of celebration in this collection. Linkages are made between Barbados and the African Igbo culture and the language used is Bajan dialect or nation language as Brathwaite would prefer to call it. The critical, cultural and historical concerns of the author inform his poetry, the African connection and the control of language are issues he has discussed in various essays over the years. I shall now briefly touch upon the various facets of this creativity and scholarship.

4.2 (EDWARD) KAMAU BRATHWAITE

The 1994 Neustadt Prize Ceremonies, 30 September 1994
Brathwaite’s poetic career parallels Walcott’s in many respects. Not only are they poets of international repute, both are authors of works which have been called “epics” of Caribbean literature. Brathwaite’s epic is titled *The Arrivants: A New Word Trilogy* (1973) and comprises his early collections of poetry interlinked by the trope of a journey which is also the governing idea of Walcott’s *Omeros*. He has explained the trilogic form in the dialectical terms of raising an issue, replying to it and trying to create a synthesis:

In other words, the first question, which is in *Rights of Passage*, is: How did we get into the Caribbean? Our people, the black people of the Caribbean - what was the origin of their presence in the Caribbean? And the antitheses to that was - well, the answer to that which emerged was that they came out of migration out of Africa, so that the second movement in the trilogy was the answer to that question. We came out of Africa. Hence, *Masks*. And then, we came out of Africa and went into the New World. Hence, *Islands*.

(Blathwaite “An Interview,” 13)

Like Achille in *Omeros*, the poetic persona journeys back to the land of his ancestors: “Exiles from here// to seas/ of bitter edges,/ whips of white worlds,/ stains of new// rivers,/ I have returned” (*Arrivants* 153). The trilogy has been seen as providing an “etiology” of Afro-Caribbean experience through a narrative of an African experience originating on the mother continent and extending to the diaspora (Irele 721). Historical, autobiographical and poetic concerns are interwoven in the work. It presents simultaneously a historical account of the New World civilization and its roots in Africa. It is not a literature of despair or recrimination but about the foundation of Caribbean culture in its varied forms be it Rastafarianism, Jazz, Calypso or cult practices like Shango worship. The diasporic experience articulated is that of the author himself who has lived away from Barbados and whose stay in Kenya even resulted in his re-naming from Edward to Kamau.

Much has been written about American and Caribbean influences on Brathwaite’s work. Attempts have been made to link his poetry to major American poets like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Charles Olson. But apart from acknowledging his attraction...
for Eliot’s “speaking voice,” Brathwaite has denied their work as having had an impact on his creativity, “I cannot say I’ve been influenced by them, I don’t know them well enough.” In contrast to this he has acknowledged a Caribbean tradition within which his poetry can be placed, “There - if people want to - yes, that’s the lineage: Cesaire, Brathwaite, Guillen, Damas” (Brathwaite, “An Interview” 25). The most clear correspondences drawn are those between Cesaire’s Notebook of a Return to My Native Land and Brathwaite’s Arrivants, both starting from local reality to etch the topographical, linguistic and sociological aspects of the Caribbean. Other Negritude poets like Senghor and Damas were available to Brathwaite through anthologies. Manifestations of orality and the importance of music in his work can be said to owe something to them. Brathwaite’s efforts in founding and running the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM), started by him in London in 1967 along with John La Rose and Andrew Salkey, brought him in touch with Caribbean poets based in Britain. He has read poetry with dub poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson, Mutabaruka and Amiri Baraka. Performing his own poetry was in a way a natural corollary to the oral rhythms in Brathwaite’s work. His reading of the Arrivants trilogy was issued as a five-disc set in the 1970s under the record label Argo.

4.2.2 Historian

Brathwaite trained as a historian first at Cambridge where he received his Bachelor’s degree and then at Sussex where he submitted his Doctoral thesis entitled “The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820.” This was published by the Oxford University Press in 1971. In this work he calls creolization a “cultural action” or a “social process” based upon the response of individuals within society to their environment and to each other. The process takes place in stages, starting with the “seasoning” of slaves when they were branded, given new names and put under apprenticeship to already creolized slaves. During this period they learnt the language and the work. This led to their “socialization” which, in cases where the slaves lived in close proximity with their masters, like the household slaves, resulted in imitation. Forms of imitation could be behavioural as well as linguistic in which case the typical West Indian imagination could be characterised by the phrase “The snow was falling in the canefields.” Brathwaite criticizes the elite blacks for losing touch with their folk culture and hence losing their chance for independence. An extremely important section of this work is that in which he describes the African orientation of Jamaican folk culture and the continuances and subversive potential of the slaves’ rituals and language. This was published separately as The Folk Culture of the Slaves in Jamaica by New Beacon Books in 1971. In his articles for Timheri Brathwaite extended the concept of creolization to a socio-cultural description of the four main culture carriers of the region - Amerindian, European, African and East Indian - and how they interacted with each other. However, even here he stresses the recognition of an ancestral relationship with the folk or aboriginal culture. I shall summarise Brathwaite’s cultural commentaries in the next section.

4.2.3. Cultural Commentator

Brathwaite’s single most important and most controversial work on Caribbean culture is Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean (1974). It was originally presented as a paper at a conference at John Hopkins University. In the introduction he talks of the Caribbean environment needing its own aesthetic, and of being the only delegate to a conference “dripping with the tropical sun.” The essay makes statements like Africa is the “submerged mother of the Creole system” which can be questioned on the basis of Brathwaite’s own pronouncements about the four different ethnicities together contributing to the creolization of Caribbean culture. Similarly his famous comment on Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea that white Creoles had not suffered enough in the Caribbean to belong is debatable to say the least. However it is the last line of the essay which is often quoted in discussing the Caribbean ethos. “The unity is submarine” is both a poetic statement of the pan-Caribbeanness he advocates as well as a challenge to the
academic conventions of the essay form, the limits of which Brathwaite explores in *Contradictory Omens*.

Besides this full length study of Caribbean culture Brathwaite has discussed aspects of it in essays and articles over a span of more than forty years. According to him artists in the West Indies face a “fragmented culture” which has led to a dissociation of sensibility in the early post-colonial literature. As and when consciousness of “rootlessness” has emerged, it has been from an emigrant perspective. Walcott, according to Brathwaite, expresses the pressures and dilemmas of this plural society. One aspect of this pluralism is the existence of subcultures and their impact on other aspects of cultural production like literature. Rastafarianism and the Jazz aesthetic are two such subcultures he discusses with respect to literature especially the West Indian novel. One of Brathwaite’s major essay of recent years is “Metaphors of Underdevelopment: A Proem for Hernan Cortez” in which he begins by speaking of “a Bajan labourer” who is caught in “a cultural catastrophe.” He explains that by culture he means “the texture and life-style of peoples . . . culture seen as dialectic of motion.” Towards the end of the essay he has moved to a position in which cultures are seen as icons of the missile and the target, “just as the symbol of the expansionist is the missile, so the symbol of the subsistence exploited cultures becomes the circle, hole or target” (“Metaphors” 250). Brathwaite’s cultural commentaries have, over the past three decades, widened in their focus from a delineation of Jamaican folk customs to a discussion of Caribbean cultural forms and finally encompassing underdeveloped third world nations.

### 4.3 WINGS OF A DOVE

#### 4.3.1 Counterculture

In the previous unit I briefly explained Rastafarian beliefs. Here I forward the idea of Rastafarianism as a counterculture to the prevailing cultural mores in the Caribbean and particularly Jamaican society, as revealed through the beliefs and the language used by members of this sect. The existence of Rastas on the margins of society has been the subject of Caribbean fiction and poetry. Roger Mais’s novel *Brother Man* (1954) depicting a Christ like Rastafarian has been analysed by Brathwaite in detail as an epitome of Jazz aesthetic. In the 1970s Orlando Patterson wrote a novel on the same theme titled *Children of Sisyphus* which shows the influence of Mais’s work. In poetry the work of Dennis Scott and James Berry has dealt with this figure.

Rastafarianism developed in Jamaica, believed Ethiopia to be the ultimate home of all black people and its emperor, Haile Selassi, to be divine. The word originated from ‘ras’, ‘chief’, the title of an Ethiopian lord or prince and ‘tafari,’ family name of the emperor. The appearance and practices of members of this cult are a marker of their peripheral position. They follow certain Old Testament tenets including refusal to cut the hair and beliefs which include vegetarianism, ganja (opium) smoking and rejection of private property. In keeping with this last tenet they use the word Babylon in its Biblical sense to denote any society characterised by sinful pursuits. Such is the Westernized Jamaican society where people are engaged in dishonest commercial and political dealings. From its beginnings in the nineteen thirties the Rastafarian movement has had a great impact on the people of Jamaica and the Caribbean. Many of its ideas, considered marginal at its inception, have passed into the mainstream and become commonplaces of thought on black power and majority control. This appropriation has been oriented towards a demand for social justice in opposition to hegemonic practices exerted by the state and its apparatuses like the police and the judiciary. The impact of these ideas has been documented by historians like Walter Rodney and cultural critics like Rex Nettleford who see it as an expression of “black consciousness” in the face of a “continuing colonial society” based on suppression and oppression.
The Rastafarian efforts to counter power structures in society include a dismantling of hegemony imposed by structures of language. This is particularly evident in modes of address used for asserting identity. They consciously refer to themselves as "black men" rather than "Negroes," as a reaction to the derogatory use of the latter word since colonial times. In Jamaican creole the first person singular is usually expressed by the pronoun "me," and the plural by "we." To the Rastafarians, however, both "me" and "we" as objects of the sentence are always governed by the subject much like the way in which Europeans governed the slaves. Because the Rastas think the use of "me" points to a subservient attitude on the part of the blacks they insist on the use of "I" for the personal pronoun (Ashcroft 48-49). The letter can also be a homonym with "high" and indicates the spiritually bound human self shared by all believers probably because it is also the last syllable of Ras Tafari. While reading the poem you will notice that Brathwaite has used the counter-language of the Rastas as an inextricable element of his poetic idiom.

4.3.2 The Text

*Wings of a Dove*

1

Brother Man the Rasta
man, beard full of lichens
    brain full of lice
watched the mice
come up through the floor-boards of his down-town, shanty-town kitchen,
and smiled. Blessed are the poor
in health, he mumbled,
that they should inherit this
wealth. Blessed are the meek
hearted, he grumbled,
for theirs is this stealth.

Brother Man the Rasta
man, hair full of lichens
    head hot as ice
watched the mice
walk into his poor
hole, reached for his peace
and the pipe of his ganja
and smiled how the mice
eyes, hot pumice
pieces, glowed into his room
like ruby, like rhinestone
and suddenly startled like diamond.

And I
Rastafar-I
in Babylon's boom
town, crazed by the moon
and the peace of this chalice, I
prophet and singer, scourge
of the gutter, guardian
Trench Town, the Dungle and Young's
Town, rise and walk through the now silent
streets of affliction, hawk's eyes
hard with fear, with
affection, and hear my people
cry, my people
shout:

Down down
white
man, con
man, brown
man, down
down full
man, frown-
ing fat
man, that
white black
man that
lives in
the town.

Rise rise
locks-
man, Solo-
man wise
man, rise
rise rise
leh we
laugh
dem, mock
dem, stop
dem, kill
dem an' go
back back
to the black
man lan'
back back
to Af-
rica.

2

Them doan mean it, yuh know,
Them cahn help it
But them clean-face browns in
Babylon town is who I most fear
an' who fears most I.
Watch de vulture dem a-fly-
in', hear de crow a-dem crow
see what them money a-buy?

Caw caw caw caw.
Ol' crow, ol' crow, cruel ol'
ol' crow, that's all them got
to show.

Crow fly flip flop
hip hop
pun de ground; na
feet feel firm
pun de firm stones; na
good pickney born
from de flesh
o' dem bones;
	naw naw naw naw.

3

So beat dem drums
dem, spread
dem wings dem,
watch dem fly
dem, soar dem
high dem,
clear in the glory of the Lord.

Watch dem ship dem
come to town dem

full o' silk dem
full o' food dem
an' dem 'plane', dem
come to groun' dem

full o' flash dem
full o' cash dem

silk dem food dem
shoe dem wine dem

that dem drink dem
an' consume dem

praisin' the glory of the Lord.

So beat dem burn
dem, learn
dem that dem
got dem nothin'

but dem
bright bright baubles

that will burst dem
when the flame dem

from on high dem
raze an' roar dem

an' de poor dem
rise an' rage dem

in de glory of the Lord.
Caribbean Poetry

Glossary

Dove: a bird symbolising peace, particularly appropriate here since the Rastafarian motto is “peace and love.”

Brother Man: a familiar form of address for male members of the Rastafarian cult, also the title of a novel by the Jamaican novelist Roger Mais (1905-1955).

lichens: a skin disease with reddish eruptions

downtown: away from the centre of the town

shanty-town: town consisting of huts, cabins and shacks

pumice: light porous lava sometimes used as powder for polishing

ganja: opium

ruby, rhinestone: precious and semi-precious stones

Babylon: in the Bible references to Babylon are disguised attacks on Rome seen as the ancient capital of persecution and paganism. The Rastas use the word to refer to any wicked Westernised society.

boomtown: town flourishing from a period of prosperity or sudden activity in commerce

chalice: literally goblet or Eucharist cup, here refers to the ganja pipe

scourge: person regarded as bringer of punishment

Dungle and Young’s Town: Kingston’s Dungle in Orlando Patterson’s Rastafarian novel Children of Sisyphus (1965), elsewhere described by Brathwaite as a “city smouldering in garbage.”

Soloman: Brathwaite’s neologism for the Biblical Solomon, a king famous for his wisdom, combining the senses of the only (solo) wise man and a lonely (solo) man

leh: to permit, also used in the imperative to imply persuasion or threat

na: no, especially at the folk level in answering a question

pickney: young child of Black or East Asian parentage

dem: used with a noun to indicate a group or a set

Crow: different from an ordinary crow, used in the sense of a carrion crow who is almost as big as a vulture and feeds on carcasses.

baubles: showy trinkets
4.3.3 Analysis

The characteristic Rastafarian term of address with which the poem begins sets the tone for other such conventions used in it. The shabby, unkempt appearance of the Rasta in this poem is not cultivated but all too real. His dilapidated lodgings in a "shanty-town" arise out of his poverty. It is true the members of this sect believe in a rejection of private property but the picture of squalor presented here goes far beyond idealistic beliefs. The mice coming up through his floorboards seem to the Rasta to embody his own situation of weakness of body and spirit. Like them he is tucked away in one corner of the house, stealthily passing his days, enveloped in beliefs born out of convictions or necessity. The only escape possible is derived from smoking ganja. The effect of the drug on him is almost instantaneous, suddenly it seems as if the eyes of the mice shine like diamonds. An ironic juxtaposition of imagined riches and the "poor hole" in which they suddenly appear is made in the second stanza. Here the drug induced hallucination makes the Rasta's "head as hot as ice," the phrase pointing to the illogical and extraordinary sense perceptions experienced in a drugged state. This state provides him with a respite from his poverty and social alienation, albeit a temporary one.

The return to reality is marked by an assertion of selfhood as the reiterated "I" testifies. Amidst the economic prosperity of modern day Jamaica the Rasta feels "crazed" and acknowledges that the drug is what offers him "peace." Smoking of ganja is prohibited by the rules of the wider society but for the Rastas it is a holy and wisdom-giving weed. It endows "Brother Man" with vision, imagination and the courage to step out of his hiding hole into the world outside. Here he notices that if suffering is a fact of existence for people, revolution is not far behind. His piercing hawk-like gaze takes in the toiling masses' cries for social justice which are transcribed in the poem. The socially privileged classes are the whites, the browns who are of mixed Afro-Caribbean and European ancestry and those among the blacks who ape them ("white black man"). Rastas are seen as agents of social amelioration, there is a call for the rise of men with "locks," matted or plaited hair of members of this sect. Not only is the Rasta wise like Solomon in his vision of equality and justice for all, he (Brathwaite insists on "man") is probably the only person who can translate this vision into reality. In "Solo-man," one of his more successful neologisms, Brathwaite has captured at once the wisdom and alienation of this "man." He realizes that satire as a weapon is useless against those who exploit others in "Babylon" hence violence remains the only effective means of counter-attack. Once these people are exterminated a true return to African values becomes possible. The phrase "back to Africa" is significant here because Rastafarianism is sometimes seen as having evolved out of Marcus Garvey's movement which used the same phrase. In it the raising of black consciousness was a prelude to an actual return to Africa.

In the second section of the poem the Rasta expresses the mutual distrust and fear characterising relations between his community and the "cleanfaced browns" who control society at large. Calling them predators by speaking of their meteoric rise as the flight of crows and vultures, he emphasizes the vice like grip ensured by the power of money. You will remember that in Walcott's poem "The Spoiler's Return," Spoiler had spoken of Trinidadian society in almost the same terms. Here Brathwaite reproduces sound effects by incorporating a rendition of the crow's cawing, flying and skipping on the ground: "caw, caw," "flip flop" and "hip hop." These phrases are used to indicate the relentless speechfying and the ubiquitousness of the people who actually control the country's resources. But that they are out of touch with the ground realities and that they pass on their attitudes and prejudices to the next generation constitutes another aspect of the Rasta's indictment. His protest is voiced in the reiteration of the word "naw" which in its strategic alteration of "caw" signifies a countering of the predatory order of things. An aspect of this order is the conspicuous consumption of articles of luxury like silk, shoes and wine listed in the third section of the poem. The tourist culture has contributed to the already sorry
state of affairs. The lure of the tourists' cash proves irresistible for some who use it to fulfil their desire for "bright bright baubles." These people, according to the Rasta, must be taught by violence or by education the insignificance of the things they crave for, suggesting that any affirmative action must be potentially revolutionary to be even remotely effective.

Biblical references and motifs present in the poem as in the phraseology "Blessed are the poor" and in words like "Babylon," "Solomon" and "chalice" gather momentum in the last section where the phrase "the glory of the Lord" is used like a refrain. Even the idea of the "boom-town" being overrun by birds of prey is derived from the book of Revelation in the Bible where Babylon's doom is predicted in these words: "Babylon the great is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird." The blaze of fire destroying the town is a vision of the apocalypse again showing the influence of Biblical sources as is the idea of the rich being destroyed and the poor rising out of it pure in body and mind. The poem therefore links up social and religious ideas as embodied in Rastafarian principles.

4.3.4 Drum Poetry

"Wings of a Dove" is from the "Rights of Passage" volume of the Arrivants trilogy, and first appeared in 1967. The title of the poem is from the first line of a popular ska tune of the early sixties which begins, "If I had the wings of a dove, I would like to fly away and be at rest." The song echoes a line from the Psalms and has also been used by Henry James as the title of one of his novels. This song expresses a yearning for escape also articulated by the Rasta in Brathwaite's poem when imagines he has grown wings to fly away (Rohler, "Blues" 72). Rohler comments that Brathwaite brings us closer to the Rastafarian experience by creating the drum rhythms of the cult (73). The music closely associated with Rastas is reggae in which a heartbeat rhythm is played on a kettledrum as an accompaniment to mournful lyrics on the theme of hardship and protest. The ska tune from which the title derives also has a quick lively 1-2-1-2 drum-beat and is considered the forerunner of reggae. This drum rhythm is present most clearly in the last section of the poem. Speak out the words "silk dem food demt shoe dem wine dem" and you will feel that the rhythm underlying them is that of the heartbeat. One of the aspects of nation language which Brathwaite mentions in "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature" is the setting up of "certain tunes, tones and rhythms which are characteristic of the folk tradition" (243). The West African connections of Caribbean vocabulary are present in words like "dem" and the call and response pattern is evoked by "na." The folk theme, rhythm, syntax and vocabulary make this poem a creative exposition of Brathwaite's theoretical formulation "nation language."

4.4 ANANSE

4.4.1 Folk Imagination

Anancy or Ananse as Brathwaite chooses to call him is the cunning trickster hero of a number of Caribbean folktales in which he appears as a mythical spider in a human form. Derived from West African culture especially that of the Akans in Ghana, the folklore associated with this figure is called Anansesem. By using the African spelling for the name of this figure Brathwaite seems to be highlighting its African origins. This is not surprising considering the author spent eight years in Ghana working with the Ministry of Education. In that country the person who has done the most to popularise Ananse lore is the theatre activist and folklorist Efua Sutherland. In her play The Marriage of Anansewa (1975) and Anansegoro (plays based on the Ananse stories) she has sought to make the exploits of this figure contemporary. In the conclusion to the play she observes, "That Ananse is, artistically, a medium for society to criticise itself can be seen in the expression 'Exterminate Ananse, and
society will be ruined.’’ The association of Ananse with the power of words (folktales are passed by word of mouth and Ananse usually talks himself out of a tricky situation in them) and the impact of words in changing the course of history is the focus of this poem.

Significantly Brathwaite aligns Ananse with Legba, regulating deity of communication between humans and gods, patron of metamorphosis, transition, and uncertainty in West African mythology. There is no direct mention of Legba in the poem but frequent references about lameness confirm the presence of this aged, lame, hunch-backed or one-legged god. Ananse is the culture-hero of intelligence and common-sense and hence has the ability to triumph over disabilities. This wit is the gift of Onyame, the Akan Supreme Divinity. Legba is quintessentially located at transition points of time and space. In fusing the two figures the poet is probably seeking the elevation of a folkloric figure to mythical dimensions and hence striving “to rehabilitate the significance of the lowly creature . . . [to] become an icon charged with transformative potential” (Warner-Lewis 59). This also enhances the social relevance of Ananse particularly in the Caribbean which has been the site of transformative disruptions like revolts and rebellions. Brathwaite’s reclamation of Anancy from the African to the Caribbean scenario is in the tradition of folklorists and creative writers like Louise Bennett and Andrew Salkey who have retold the exploits of this trickster as children’s tales. John Figueroa’s rendering aptly sums up this reclamation:

Anancy is a spider;
Anancy is a man;
Anancy’s a West Indian
And West African.

4.4.2 The Text

Ananse

With a black snake’s unwinking eye
thinking thinking through glass
through quartz

quarries of stony water
with a doll’s liquid gaze, crystal,
his brain green, a green chrysalis
storing leaves,

memories trunked up in a dark attic,
he stumps up the stares
of our windows, he stares, stares
he squats on the tips

of our language
black burr of conundrums
eye corner of ghosts, ancient histories;

he spins drumbeats, silver skin
webs of sound
through the villages;

I’acky heard him
and L’Ouverture
all the hung-
ry dumb-bellied chieftains

who spat
their death into the ground:
Goave, Port-au-Prince, Half Moon Fort,
villages,
dead lobster-pot crews,
wire, red sea shells, coconut trees’ hulls, nodding skulls,
black iron bells, clogged,
no glamour of noon on the man-
grove shore.
Now the poor hang him up in the ceiling,
their brooms cannot reach his hushed corner
and he sits with the dust, desert’s rainfall of soot,
plotting a new fall from heaven

threading
threading
the moon
moonlight storie:

his full mouth agape
a black pot
grinning
grinning

round fire that boils in his belly
walloba wood words,
eyes, fireflies, sparks,
crashing coals’ waterfalls,
grey ashes aroused,
old men’s ghosts,
cinders,
burnt memories’ eyes in the hot hut,
flesh,
curling silver,
revealing their shadows of meaning
as the god stares down,
black beating heart of him breathing
breathing
consuming our wood
and the words of our houses
black iron-eye’d eater, the many-eye’d maker,
creator,
dry stony world-maker, word-breaker,
creator...

In the yard the dog barks at the stranger.

Glossary

quartz: mineral crystallising in the shape of prisms
crystal: clear transparent ice like mineral found in rocks
4.4.3 Analysis

Ananse is a frozen, inert presence staring through the “glass” and “quartz,” and yet the potentiality inherent in the figure is highlighted by the repetition of the word “thinking.” This passive state of development is linked to a “chrysalis” which stores leaves in anticipation of growth. Ananse, the culture-hero, is so embedded in the popular imagination that his “reincarnation in the flesh of the living” at opportune moments of history is a distinct possibility (Rohlehr, “Rehumanization” 186). The physical actions of Ananse as spider-man are fused with the verbal dexterity which is his chief characteristic in folk narratives, as is the idea of geographical space with mental space in the formulation “memories trunked up in a dark attic.” An attic, a storing area for old, ancestral possessions with memories associated with them, conjures up an idea of a musty, cobweb-filled place, the common haunt of spiders. Ancestral memory is the favourite source of folktales like the ones in which Ananse figures. Much like the objects in an attic it is always at hand and needs only a little effort to be recalled and given a new form such as the one a chrysalis develops into.

The memory evoked here is clearly linked to the African heritage the slaves brought with them to the Caribbean. These are the “ancient histories” of various tribes transported en masse from Africa who have kept the African connection alive in language through proverbs, riddles, “conundrums.” Ananse “spins” riddles which contain traces of an ancient way of life resonant with drums beating to convey messages from one village to another. The connection is reinforced with a linkage of Ananse to Legba whom Brathwaite’s notes to The Arrivants call “the Dahomean/ Haitian god of the gateway . . . the crucial link between man and the other gods . . .” (273). Ananse’s stumping up the “stares,” (stairs) of the windows and a mention of his “fall from heaven” stresses his relationship with lame deities, be it Legba from Caribbean mythology or Hephaestus from Greek mythology.

The “reincarnation” of Ananse qualities is to be found in the historical figures of Tacky and L’Ouverture whose exploits in popular slave rebellions occupy the popular imagination as much as Ananse lore. Besides them other “chieftains” also set little value on their life and the names of various places given in the poem carry mnemonic associations of other slave revolts. While history may have glamourised these, Brathwaite’s presentation of them is in terms of the human losses suffered about which there is no glamour. Living off the sea for sustenance the “lobster-pot crews” were the first casualties of war, their “nodding skulls” floating on the water,
their lobster traps and fishing vessels made out of coconut trees lying as abandoned as the “black iron bells,” remnants of a colonially imposed religion. Intrigue as practised by men like Tacky and L’Ouverture was required for the overthrow of colonial slavery. This is equated with the spider’s ability to spin webs which ensnares unsuspecting victims. The “poor,” who benefited most from the revolutions, are the keepers of these accounts. Try as they might the future descendants of those emancipated cannot obviate the traces of history: “their brooms cannot reach his hushed corner.”

The sustained relevance of Ananse to Caribbean society is in the revolutionary capacity of language. The nets he now weaves are linguistic, the “moonlight stories” are as evocative of ancestral heritage as the “silver skin webs of sound” which were a call to subversive actions. In West African culture traditional story-tellers, griots, often narrate stories to a gathering of villagers around a fire. The griot is usually considered to be divinely inspired in his narration which transcends the narrative act and becomes the social act of performance. Ananse, the spinner of words brings the community together performing the function of the griot. His are “walloba wood words” describing the Caribbean milieu since the walloba tree is native to this region. That these words can kindle the latent revolutionary potential is imagistically rendered by an evocation of fire, the symbol of inspiration: “fireflies, sparks, crashing coals’ waterfalls, grey ashes aroused...” I mentioned earlier that Brathwaite has collated the figures of Ananse and Hephaestus, the lame Greek god of fire and of crafts. The images of fire just explained are an extension of this linkage. Like Ananse, Hephaestus is a weaver of sorts, he trapped his unfaithful wife Aphrodite with the god Ares in a net of his own devising. Another similarity between the two is their craftsmanship, with “words” in the former case and with objects in the latter.

The “god” who looks down is also Legba, who enables communication between the human and the non-human worlds. When the Ananse tale is recounted the boundaries between these two dimensions collapse, the magical seems real in the narration of the griot. One aspect of this figure was manifested in the rebel leaders who are responsible for the Caribbean as it exists today. Hence Ananse is “world-maker” and “creator” in a typically Caribbean sense. But since battles can be fought on the terrain of language Ananse is an epitome of the folk imagination which is instrumental in providing the working features of a language. So he is also a “word-breaker” since the transformation effected in an imposed language is through these features. The scenario of the griot narrating stories to the villagers gathered around a fire, which had been bracketed off by the poet’s discussion of Ananse’s multifacetedness, is evoked in the concluding line of the poem. The dog barking at the “stranger” interrupts the telling of the tale, just as the arrival of colonising “strangers” had disrupted the African culture to which Ananse originally belongs.

4.4.4 Magical Realism

Commenting on *Islands*, the third book of his *Arrivants* trilogy from which this poem is taken, Brathwaite draws attention to it being much more fragmented than the previous two collections. This is because it reflects the “physical and geo-psychic fragmentation of the islands themselves” (Brathwaite, “Interview” 19). The fragmentation is evinced in the heterogeneity of images as in this poem. The boundaries between the natural and the supernatural are collapsed and both are presented without any hierarchical presuppositions on the part of the author. Ananse is at once a common house spider in the homes of the poor people as well as the figure who inspired the heroes of Caribbean history. The various different cultures with their attendant histories (the British Caribbean in Jamaica and the French Caribbean in Haiti) interpenetrate each other within the poem. A similar fusion occurs in the case of folklore and different mythologies such as the Haitian and the Greek evoked through the presence of the gods Legba and Hephaestus. Since the
term magical realism has general reference to fiction and has rarely been applied to poetry. Brathwaite has given his own interpretation of it:

How the metaphors and images interlock and interweave and interpenetrate each other, so that you increasingly have . . . a seamless kind of poetry, increasing without punctuation, where images inform, flow and influence each other. It is a kind of surrealism as well, but magical realism, I think, is nearer to it, because it is the transformation of reality into the prism of imagination and light.

("Interview" 22)

I have already explained how the images fuse into one another. Stylistically this is presented by the short lines of the poem running into each other as in this example, "no glamour of noon on man-\// grove shore," where the word mangrove broken into two conveys an "osmosis" of human actions into the natural surroundings. This was historically proved by the various battles for freedom fought using guerrilla tactics in which the natural surroundings became an ally. In the last few lines of Brathwaite's comment there is the idea of reality seen through the "prism" of imagination. This is also the idea with which "Ananse" begins. The prismatic qualities of glass, crystal and quartz, mentioned in the first few lines of the poem, in which Ananse is fossilized, waiting to be revitalized through folk memory, poetically render the same image Brathwaite has used in the interview.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

Brathwaite's work as a historian and cultural critic informs his poetry. An awareness of the cultural origins of certain phenomenon like Rastafarianism and figures like Ananse is evinced in their contextualisation both in poetry and prose. These are a medium for the expression of "folk" or people's views on the social reality of their existence. The Rastafarian's critique of materialism and Ananse's ability to inspire historical figures are instances of popular and folk culture playing a decisive role in socio-historical processes. Another aspect of Brathwaite's poetry at this stage is the incorporation of oral rhythms. The free verse pattern he uses facilitates this orality since it allows him to experiment with varying line lengths, some even comprised of one word or one syllable.

The poems from Masks, the central volume of the trilogy, express the rootedness of Caribbean culture in Africa through the journey of the Ashanti people in search of a new land. Here the poetic persona returns to the land of his ancestors, a journey which might have influenced the section in Walcott's Omeros when Achille in a quest of identity visits the land of his origins and meets his father, Afolabe. Brathwaite's persona in Masks undertakes an unsuccessful search for roots:

I travelled to a distant town
I could not find my mother
I could not find my father
I could not hear the drum
Whose ancestor am I? (Arrivants 125)

Some connectedness with the African past is expressed in the last volume Islands in poems like "Ananse," "Vévé" and "Negus," but ultimately it is aspects of the region's degeneration - its racial disharmony, materialist and tourist oriented economy, fraudulent religious cults - which underlie the pessimistic vision with which the trilogy concludes, "making/ with their// rhythms some-/ thing torn// and new" The lack of punctuation at the end of the last verse-line pointing to the continuation of the process of "making" the islands.
4.6 QUESTIONS

Q.1 Compare and contrast Brathwaite's Rastafarian analysis of Jamaican society in "Wings of a Dove" with Walcott's views on Trinidadian society in "The Spoiler's Return."

Q.2 Discuss the oral rhythms incorporated by Brathwaite in his poetry with reference to any two of his poems.

Q.3 Analyse the magical realist elements in "Ananse." Support your answer with detailed textual analysis.

4.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Material


Secondary Material


