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Author

Chukwu, Augustine

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BRIDGING THE GULF: THE ANCESTRAL MASK AND HOMECOMING IN EDWARD BRATHWAITE'S "MASKS"

By

Augustine Chukwu

One memorable line in Derek Walcott's collection of poems, *The Gulf*, is "The Gulf, your gulf, is daily widening,"¹ and Robert D. Hamner points to the "large gulfs of space and time between the present-day West Indian and the land of his ancestors."² But this "gulf," as Diana Lynn points out, is the West Indian's "personal dichotomy as much as the gulf between civilizations, peoples and states of mind. . ."³ Parallel with the gulf is the mask: that posture which conceals the real nature of a person. Derek Walcott, in his plays, employs the mask as a medium through which he depicts falsehood, mimicry, and illusion. In "Tim Jean and His Brothers," the Devil wears the mask of the Old Man and the Planter in order to facilitate his mission of provoking the anger of the three brothers and thereby having their flesh for a prize. In "Dream on Monkey Mountain," the image is that of "black faces/white masks," and it alludes to the black man's desire to be white. Makak's "white mask with long black sisal hair" is a constant reminder of his illusion of the moon as a white goddess, "who lives in his arms all night and tells him that he, a descendent of African Kings and a great healer, must lead his people back to Africa."⁴

But Brathwaite, whose "'African' poet is responsible to his community,"⁵ employs the mask image in more ways than one. As Anne Walmsley points out, there are at least three levels of meaning for the mask in the poem "Masks": the mask which obscures the true man beneath, the mask of the dead ancestor whom he would adopt, and the mask of the "god of the pathway." Brathwaite's additional application of the mask image is typical of traditional Africa, in which the people expressed their belief in the totality of existence by depicting the ever-presence of gods and ancestral spirits in the affairs of men. This traditional function is illustrated by the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, in his portrayal of the ancestral masks *Egungun* in his novel, *Things Fall Apart*. These ancestral masks are said to represent the nine dead fathers of the Umuofia clan, and they "rise from the dead" to mediate in cases involving their descendants. The description of one of these masks emphasizes the fear and veneration they evoke from the mortal beings: "He looked terrible with the smoked raffia body, a huge wooden face painted white except for the round hollow eyes and the charred teeth that were as big as a man's fingers. On his head were two powerful horns."⁷ Even when Okonkwo's wives recognize the second

egwugwu's "springy walk" as their husband's, they keep the thought to themselves because the community attaches sanctity to the ancestors. Though Brathwaite's ancestral mask is that of the Akan, the principle is essentially the same. Geoffrey Parrinder is right when he says that:

*Belief in the continued existence and influence of the departed fathers of the family and tribe is very strong in all West Africa. Not only are the ancestors revered as past heroes, but they are felt to be still present, watching over the household, directly concerned in all the affairs of the family and property, giving abundant harvests and fertility. They are the guardians of the tribal traditions and history. . . .*⁸

Thus, there is a sense of continuity between the past and the present; and for Edward Brathwaite, who recognizes that "African culture not only crossed the Atlantic, it crossed, survived, and creatively adapted itself to its new environment,"⁹ to involve himself in an African ritual is quite normal. Brathwaite also recognizes like the late Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo that many Africans abandoned the gods when "a white axe of lightning"¹⁰ split their trees. But both poets are equally aware that the gods were still "alive." Thus, Brathwaite's prayer to the "god of pathways" for guidance is comparable to Okigbo's plea to his "mother Idoto" for audience.

Brathwaite is quite aware that in spite of the similarities between Africa and the West Indies, he remains essentially an outsider on that continent:

*Let me without
my mother's*

*blood, my father's
holy Kra, traverse
paths where yet*

*the new dead
cannot know that
time was evil,*

*but where dew's
ears prepare
for my coming. (p. 132)*

Roman Catholics can hear the echo of their communicants in this plea: "Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." The image of the dew carries with it the idea of rain, and we

recognize Brathwaite's impending journey as symbolic of regeneration. His own personal appearance sharply contrasts with the mask he intends to wear:

*So for my hacked
face, hallowed eyes,
undrumming heart,*

*make me a black
mask that dreams
silence,*

*reflects no light,
smiles no pretence,
hears not my brother's*

language. (p. 132)

The image of the poet's face is that of disfigurement and lack of energy. But he seeks to replace it with a mask of darkness, that allows for the proper evaluation and perception of the forces of life. Brathwaite's black mask also contrasts with Makak's white mask in Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, and the image of dreaming, though echoing this play, refers to a state of mind in which all that is done is merely observation. The last two lines above refer to the gulf between the poet and his African brethren, created by their inability to communicate in their ancestral language.

The poet's quest is a reenactment of different phases in African history. It begins from slavery, to which he is connected by birth, and ends with the continent's encounter with Christianity and colonialism. His depiction of the slave trade exposes its terrible impact. He hears "the whips of the slavers," and sees "the tears of my daughters" (pp. 132-33). Brathwaite's success in these images lies in his ability to evoke our senses: we can hear with him the "shattered cries" and see with him the "feet bleeding" of the slaves. If this is a painful experience, his stop at the market place offers no consolation. The image of the flies "clotting round entrails and trinkets" is a repulsive depiction of the corruption in the society, and there is a sense of chaos in the broken "kenkey" pots and drinking gourds. Even the warrior's dance, *Asafoakye* lacks vigour and spirit, and the people's sacrifice of a cock is an empty and meaningless gesture. On the whole, the poet's quest reveals to him a society that is gradually drifting from spirituality to materialism, and where life has become meaningless. It is ironic that this change occurs simultaneously with the apparent triumph of the "Nazarene's cross" over the "Nyame's tree." For the "new ancestor," the people have been entrapped, and he emphasizes this view with suggestions of the domination of their

commercial life by foreign trade, in the line "cocoa grows now" (p. 134), and the individuality that has begun to replace the people's sense of community, in the goats who "destroy" the years "with their chewing impersonal stares" (p. 134).

If the poet's journey into the past, in the fifth section of the poem, "Crossing the River," indicates that the events of today are repetitions of history, it also shows how the people made a determined effort to solve their problems. The poet, now "eating time like a mud-fish" (p. 136), sees the once-glorious Ashanti Kingdom beset by disunity, corruption, and insecurity:

*My people, that is the condition of our
country today:
it is sick at heart, to its bitter clay.* (p. 143)

The title "The Golden Stool" is enough to remind us of how these problems were solved:

*To down in thunder from his heaven
Anokye brought the Golden Stool.* (p. 144)

This action not only implies a divine creation, but it is also revolutionary. Like all revolutions, it is fraught with incidents leading to bloodshed and even to the "overturning of stools." Onyame (God) becomes not only a Creator but also the first ancestor of the nation. The people's essence and being come solely under His control:

*And when the cycle is ripe
I, giver of life to my people,
crack open the skull, skill*

*of shell, care--
fully carved craft
of bones, and I kill.* (p. 146)

This image of the Ashanti as God's own people is reminiscent of the Israelites, but His image here is parallel to that of Ogun, the Yoruba god whose nature is dual and seemingly contradictory--that of being creative and destructive. Because of Onyame's role as "the Final Ancestor, the Creator, the Creator of the First Progenitor, who made all diverse Akans of one blood, the true High God,"¹¹ it is little surprising that the speaker in this section of the poem warns that no elder be asked "to lead you again through the branches . . ." (p. 145), and asks whoever wishes to speak to "wear a black mask of silence." This statement might sound contradictory, but it indicates a paradox. Onyame knows the thoughts and feelings of all His people, and therefore when He speaks it is their

voice that we hear.

The poet-ancestor's problem still remains that of making an intimate contact with the environment:

*welcome your brother now
my trapped curled tongue
still cries. And I return,
walking these burnt-
out streets, brain limp-
ing pain, masked
in this wood, straw*

*and thorns, seek-
ing the dirt of the com-
pound where my brother*

*buried the thin breed-
ing worm that grew
from her heart*

to her sorrow . . . (p. 148)

The image of the "trapped curled tongue" exposes the poet's isolation, and his sense of insecurity. What he needs is a confirmation of the kinship that he feels, and so he goes in search of the binding force between him and the landscape. His inability to find this binding force--the "black chord of birth," shatters any illusions he had had about being part of the soil. His unmasking of himself symbolically indicates his perception of himself as unfit for the role of an ancestor. His "navel string"--that part of his body nearest to the lost umbilical chord--"screams," lamenting the fate of the nation today, (and reminiscent of John Milton in his poem "Lycidas,") asking Onyame why He abandoned His people at this time. The poet observes that the divine stool never faced up to "the white gun of plunder" and the onslaughts of Christianity. The slave trade is depicted in images reminiscent of cannibalism:

*flesh of my brother's flesh
torn to feed ships (p. 150)*

This image is a complex one that evokes a wide range of interpretations. The slaves are like Christ in being sacrificed, and the feeding on their flesh can be compared to the Christian holy communion. But unlike communion, the recipients--ships--are gigantic monsters, whose sole existence depends on human flesh. The idea of "tearing" brings back to memory the separation between people that the trade involved.

If the poet bewails the abandonment of the people by the

gods, he suggests also that it is not without reason:

profit's sea?
too proud?
too loud

in our white teeth
of praises?
too rich?

too external?
too ready
with old ceremonial? (p. 150)

The repetition of the adverb "too" emphasizes the lack of moderation that has gripped the society. The people's "white teeth" are hygienically good, but they are used for flattery and deceit, and by being "too external" the people lose a sense of the inward spirituality that is essential to life. The poet shows his disappointment and concern that nothing seems to have changed for the better: "the dust learns nothing/with listening ...". Above all, he sees the society gradually becoming a "wasteland" and the people becoming "hollow." He shows the relationship between art and life when he compares the gradual disintegration of traditional life to his stool, which "the termites' dark teeth, three/hundred years working/have patiently ruined" (p. 150). In this image of time and its destructive forces, we also find a hint of the separation that exists between the West Indian and Africa. And the poet-artist finds himself not fitting in quite well with his traditional role in the society.

In spite of his failure to find a real home in his ancestral homeland, the poet sees his effort as an achievement:

How have I failed
who only needed friends'

quick eyes to share
the terror?

How have I failed
who only tried to dare

the ships; slow journey's whips;
who speaks to me of terror? (pp. 153-54)

For the descendants of the former African slaves, memories of the slave trade bring feelings of rage, and even shame. The symbolic reversal of that Middle Passage is therefore an act of courage on the poet's part. He has confronted the monstrous

ships and relived the tragic fate of his ancestors. His journey is an exorcism of this past, and he can now claim God for his anchor:

*You I depend upon:
Onyame's eldest son. (p. 153)*

The role of Nana Tano (Onyame's eldest son and the sacred river) is analogous to that of Christ in the Holy Trinity. And being a River, Tano also functions as a source of new life--a role parallel to the Christian baptism. The poet's appeal to Asase Yaa, the Earth Mother, for protection, compares with the Roman Catholic invocation of the Holy Mary. And his appeal to both Asase Yaa and Onyame's eldest son indicates the complementary role of the gods and the spirits. His departure signals the advent of a new dawn:

*I will rise
and stand on my feet*

*like akoko the cock
like akoko the cock*

*who cries
who cries in the morning. (pp. 156-57)*

The mood here is that of pride and confidence, but it is clear that the poet's "learning" continues, and that he hopes for the gods' continuous guidance.

If the purpose of Brathwaite's journey "is to bring into the consciousness of the New World Negro the sense of the sacred that he began to lose with the fall into slavery,"¹² then *Masks* stands out as a remarkable achievement. The poet succeeds in avoiding sentimentality and sheer romanticism, while at the same time educating West Indians and even Africans on the true worth of their ancestral traditions. His use of the ancestral mask indicates his concern for the spiritual life, and the need for the present, past, and future to continue to form a mighty whole. His delight at his achievement is underscored by this comment in his essay "Timehri":

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 diviners. . . . When I turned to leave, I was no longer a lonely individual talent;

there was something wider, more subtle, more tentative; the self without ego, without I, without arrogance. And I came home to find that I had not really left. That it was still Africa; Africa in the Caribbean.¹³

Brathwaite's "living diviners" are the folk, who live in the rural areas of Africa, and who have managed to cling to their traditions in spite of the damaging effects of colonialism. The poet's later works, especially "Islands" and *Mother Poem*, confirm his perception of his home as "Africa in the Caribbean." In these poems, he makes a conscious attempt to bring to the surface those "hidden gods." Brathwaite's 'individual talent' is manifested within the context of the society as a communal entity. Hence, in addition to poet, he plays the role of historian, musician, prophet, and philosopher.

David Lowenthal and Lambros Comitas may have to change their perception of the West Indian's attitude towards Africa. Brathwaite has aptly demonstrated that there are indeed "African connections," and that "a positive identification with Africa"¹⁴ could be viable.

¹Derek Walcott, *The Gulf* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970, first published in 1963), p. 61.

²Robert D. Hamner, "Derek Walcott's Theater of Assimilation," *West Virginia University Philological Papers* 25:86-93.

³Diana Lynn, "The Concept of the Mulatto in Some Works of Derek Walcott," *Caribbean Quarterly* 26 (1980):49-69.

⁴Edith Oliver, "Off Broadway: Once Upon a Full Moon," *The New Yorker*, 27 March 1971, p. 83.

⁵Laurence Breiner, "Tradition, Society, the Figure of the Poet," *Caribbean Quarterly* 26 (1980):6.

⁶Anne Walmsley, "Dimensions of Song: A Comment on the Poetry of Derek Walcott and Edward Brathwaite," *BIM* 13 (1970): 152-167.

⁷Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958), p. 81.

⁸Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion* (London: The Epworth Press, 1949), p. 115

⁹Edward K. Brathwaite, "The African Presence in Caribbean

Literature," *BIM* 17 (1979):33-44.

¹⁰ Edward K. Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973; poem published separately, 1968), p. 130. References are to this edition.

¹¹ Maureen Warner, "Odomankoma Kyreme Se," *Caribbean Quarterly* 19 (1973):51-99.

¹² Kenneth Ramchand, *An Introduction to the Study of West Indian Literature* (London: Nelson Caribbean, 1976), p. 141.

¹³ "Timehri," in *Is Massa Day Dead?* ed. Orde Coombs (Garden City, 1974), as quoted by Laurence Breiner in "Tradition, Society, the Figure of the Poet," *Caribbean Quarterly* 26 (1980):6.

¹⁴ David Lowenthal and Lambros Comitas, "Introduction: Cultural Expressions of Class and Color," in *Consequences of Class and Color: West Indian Perspectives*, ed. David Lowenthal and Lambros Comitas (New York: Anchor Books, 1973).