

# Edward Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* and The Trope of Cultural Searching

by

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## Abstract

*West Indian poetry has played a central role not only in the development of postcolonial literature, but also in the articulation of a kind of national consciousness, a rhetorical rehearsal for an emergent nationhood. This paper examines the issue of identity search in the poetry of a quintessential Caribbean poet, Edward Kamau Brathwaite. One of his poetic oeuvre is selected for the discourse, that is, The Arrivants (1981). The paper argues that in the poems, Brathwaite successfully attempts reconciliation with his original culture, the African culture. In the main, it is revealed that Africa in Brathwaite's poetry is a motif and an enduring trope. He uses his poetry as a means of recreating and redefining the essence of his black color and West Indian experience. He sustains in his work an impassioned dynamic of objection to the supposition that the black man is an inferior being. Therefore, it is concluded that Brathwaite's obsession with the theme of Africa is an attempt at exploding the myth of inferiority that has been ascribed to African culture.*

One major thematic strand runs through the poetry of Edward Brathwaite – this is a quest 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, 1978:8). Brathwaite'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” (Michael Dash, 1970:122). In fact, the importance of Africa in West Indian writings cannot be overestimated, either as providing alternative metaphors of cultural difference or as a fully developed Negritude. This is in agreement with the assertion of David Richards (1990) and Aderemi Raji-Oyelade (2005).

The business of this presentation is to isolate and foreground the motif of Africa in West Indian Literature using Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* (1981) as a launching pad. We cannot gainsay the fact that the trope of Africa is a recurrent feature of West Indian literature. As Kole Omotoso (1982) rightly observes, 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 sojourns 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 (30).*

The above postulation of Omotoso echoes that of Coulthard (1962) who believes that for the African enslaved and their descendants in the Caribbean, the impact of these psychic wounds have been so profound that their consciousness has over the centuries been afflicted by the crisis of identity. Indeed, it is this very crisis that basically informs the creative imagination of the average Caribbean artist. All kinds of cleavages along the lines of race, wealth, class and political affiliation have caused the alienation felt by the African people in the Caribbean. This position is the central thesis of an informing and insightful discourse by Shelby (1990). In the book, Steele mildly interrogates some themes of African-American literature that emphasize racial solidarity. 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 recreate and redefine the essence of his/her black color and West Indian experience – the need to capture the reality of the people who seem rootless.

Therefore, the trope of Africa is a case study of “tropological revision” in West Indian literature. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988), tropological revision is “the manner in which a specific trope is repeated with differences, between two or more texts” (xxv). Karen King-Aribisala (1991) in her perceptive article “African Homogeneity: The Affirmation of a ‘United’ African and Afro-West Indian Identity” declares:

*One of the consequences of this predicament is the tendency of West Indian writers to make actual or imaginative pilgrimage to Africa, in an attempt to rediscover their ancestral roots (p. 40).*

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 but progressive attempt to achieve 'wholeness' out of the debris of his past. His Ghanaian experience, no doubt, had opened his eyes to this possibility. His comment on this issue is worth quoting at this juncture:

*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. I came to connect my history with theirs, the bridge of my mind now linking Atlantic and ancestor, homeland and heartland (Brathwaite, 1970: 38).*

Brathwaite believes that the 'middle-passage' experience is not after all totally a traumatic experience; rather, the experience is "a pathway or channel between (African) tradition and what is being evolved on new soil in the Caribbean (Brathwaite, 1970:38). Also, in an essay, "Timehri", Brathwaite relates how he had gone to England thinking he was a British citizen but had his illusions shattered. According to him, "I found and felt myself rootless on arrival in England". He then 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" (King, 1980:130). According to King, Brathwaite's stints as a historian, a pamphleteer and a poet have been to transcend the colonial sense of rootless ness and isolation.

Suffice it to reiterate the fact that Brathwaite's poetry thematically signifies some indices of post-colonial literary discourse. He writes about the themes of Africa, slavery and colonialism, alienations, exile and search for identity of literature and society. Actually, the trope of Africa in Brathwaite's poetry is an example of what Paul Gilroy (1995) refers to as 'Afrocentricity'. According to Gilroy, 'Afrocentricity' is "African genius and African values created, recreated, reconstructed, and derived from our history and experiences in our best interests" (188).

Commenting on the trope of 'Africa' in the poetry of Brathwaite, Sesan Ajayi (1991) opines:

*His 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, etc 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 the theme of Africa in Brathwaite's poetry as he asserts:

*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 elements 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. Omotayo Oloruntoba-Oju (1994) in her essay, "Literature of the Black Diaspora", contends 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 tropes from African cultural founts" (139).

Perhaps Oloruntoba-Oju's claim is a reference to the view of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Hellen Tiffin (1989) that Brathwaite regards a return to African roots as pertinent to contemporary West Indian. They state further:

*The West Indian poet and historian E.K. Brathwaite proposes a model which, while stressing the importance of the need to privilege the African connection over the European, also stresses the multi-cultural, syncretic nature of the West Indian reality (p. 35).*

In his book, *Race and Color in Caribbean Literature* (1962), G.R. Coulthard highlights the themes of race and color as well as the grand motif of Africa in Caribbean literature. Also, Mark Kinkead Weeke's "Africa-in Caribbean Fictions" attempts an analysis of the inter-text of 'Africa' in two West Indian novels.

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 Peter, 1992:60).

In the search for identity in the Caribbean, Brathwaite has made a remarkable contribution to the theme of Africa in Caribbean literature. In *Masks*, particularly, he 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 mores.

However, it is germane at this point to note that Brathwaite does not glorify or fantasize Africa in his poetry. His reference to Africa comes on naturally. This is to put forward the argument earlier raised by Shelby Steele (1989). About *Masks* in which the motif of Africa finds its utmost expression, Michael Dash comments:

*The following sequence, '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 (1970: 219).*

When Brathwaite refers to Kumasi as:

*A city of gold paved with silver, ivory altars, tables of horn, the thorn bush of love burst on the hill bleeds in the West (Masks, 138).*

He is more or less stating the obvious. This readily brings us to the position which Brathwaite occupies within the Negritude tradition. There is a way in which every black writer can be classified as a Negritudist, whether such a writer lives in the continent or in the Diaspora, and such classification can be upheld as long as aspects of Africa abide with the writer's thematic preoccupations. However, the hard-core Negritudists like David Diop and Leopold Sedar Senghor indulge in glorifying, celebrating and creating fantasies about Africa. Therefore, using this tendency as our yardstick, it becomes obvious that Brathwaite exhibits a moderate negritude outlook.

Brathwaite's physical and literary excursion into Africa is a resemblance of the Israelites' Exodus. This is clearly depicted in the epigraph to "Rights 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 I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy (ii).*

Brathwaite portrays the plight of the black man in three stages in his 'trilogy' (*The Arrivants*- "Rights of Passage", "Islands" and "Masks") - the identification of Africa as his roots, the celebration of the realities of African heritage and the reconciliation with the alienation. The identification of the poet with Africa is the focus of the first part of the trilogy. The title "Rights of Passage" indicates the anthropological term "rites de passage" which can be seen as a transition between one condition to another. Therefore, the trilogy signifies a yearning by the poet for identification with his African origin. It also becomes a semiotic of transformation in Brathwaite's consciousness of his own identity. The tone of the third part of the trilogy changes, and this marks the first phase of the transition. Even though Brathwaite 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'.

In "Wings of 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 Ian'  
back back  
to Af-  
rica.*

Thus, in "Wings of 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, Brathwaite's "Rights 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  
walled cities  
arise ...  
Grand, God  
a clear release from thieves*

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

*let me suffer  
nothing  
to remind 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 forth  
On the road  
Of the morning (13-14).*

Furthermore, in Brathwaite’s presentation of Tizzic’s case, he denounces the tyranny of a foreign imposition such as Christianity that robs Tizzic of its power of enrichment. Through “Carnival’s stilts of Song”, Tizzic comes nearer to attaining the seventh heaven, but he is doomed to failure (Patricia Ismond, 1974:58).

For Brathwaite, the implication of these denunciations resides in his search for a religion, which is basically African in conception, to replace the Christian religion. Ultimately, for Brathwaite, the rejection of western values 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 Brathwaite’s 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 Africa (Ghana) where he worked for upwards of eight years and back to the West Indies. Therefore, he finds in this personal experience of excursions 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 African Diaspora. For instance:

*E-  
gypt  
In Af-  
rica  
Mesopo  
tamia  
Mero  
e  
the  
nile  
silica  
glass  
and brittle  
Sa  
hara, Tim  
buctu, Gao  
the hills of  
Ahafo, winds  
of the Ni-  
ger, Kumasi  
and Kiver  
down the  
coiled Congo  
and down  
that black river*

----- (“Rights 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 way the black people are scattered all over the world.

“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 emergent literature operating within the European “avant garde” technique attitude, which can be adopted to express the cultural concern of a new notion of the third world.

The theme of Africa finds its utmost expression in “Masks” which explores the culture of 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. “Mask” is indeed a religious poem put to cultural, political and psychotherapeutic purposes on behalf of the whole people. “Masks”, therefore, repeatedly ‘returns’ to “the dance, symbol of transcendence” (Simon Gikandi, 1992:113). Brathwaite’s coming to terms with Africa in “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 Africa, particularly among the Akan of Ghana. 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.

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 of the praise poetry, the lament, the dirge, incantatory verse, the curse and the abuse. Samuel Asein (1971) has identified the following lines as traditional (African) incantatory verse and compared them with the overture in Christopher Okigbo’s ritual poem, “Heavensgate”:

*I who have pointed my face  
to the ships, the winds’ anger,  
today have returned, eat-  
ing time like a mud-  
fish; who was lost,  
tossed among strangers,  
waves’ whitest con-  
sonants, have returned  
where the stones  
give lips to the water:  
----- (“Bosompri”, 136-137).*

Brathwaite's poetry in 'Masks' is a celebration of Africa. According to Asein (1971):

*We find that in his 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 and 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 frimpong  
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 ..... (Masks, 91-92).*

This kind of poetry is described by Kwabena Nketia (1969) as the kind that may be heard on social and ritual occasions. It 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 duru wood  
with the hollow blood  
that makes a womb  
-----  
You dumb adom wood  
will be bent,  
will be solemnly bent, belly  
rounded with fire, wound-  
ed with tools (Mask, 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 animal,  
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. In the previous instance, Brathwaite gives evidence of his mastery of the traditional speech, mode of prayer and invocation as he invokes the spirit of the tree:

*Funtumi Akore  
Tweneboa Akore  
Spirit of the cedar  
Spirit of the cedar tree  
Tweneboa kodia*

-----  
*We are addressing you  
Ye re kyere wo  
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 Pathfinders”, 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:

*summon the emirs, kings of the desert  
horses caparisoned, beaten gold bent,  
Archers and criers, porcupine arrows, bows bent;  
recount now the gains and the losses;  
Agades, Sokoto, El Hassan dead in his tent,  
the silks and the brasses, the slow weary text (“Masks”, 102).*

This reveals that African history has been a betrayal of brother by brother, and it is discovered in the poems that African people are partly responsible for their own enslavement by the Western world. "Pathfinders" 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.

"Islands", the final part of Brathwaite's trilogy, attempts a new stocktaking of the Caribbean man. It continues the religious mood and imagery of "Masks" by probing the possible ways in which God, the remote fisherman, may be trying to gather his fish, the common people of the black Diaspora. Old bridges of song (spiritual, blue, work songs) collapse in the mechanized cities, but the primeval rhythm is not totally expunged; the Ananse tales are thin remnants of plenteous African mythology.

Essentially, Islands is a demonstration of the black man's attempt, spiritually, to come to terms with his new world. It is also the rejection of European culture on one hand and the recognition and affirmation of his African roots on the other, all leading to the creation of a new identity within the new world context. Abiola Irele (1970) observes that:

*The return to the Caribbean scene in 'Islands' is thus prepared by a new awareness developed from the earlier phases of the poet's adventure. The most significant feature of this volume appears to be the poet's insistence on the direct line of culture and spirituality that form the African antecedents of common folk to that overwhelming vigour of life and expression which is their special contribution to the heritage of the islands, to the identity of the Caribbean; it is certainly not too large a claim to state that the experience of "Masks" stands behind this insistence (30).*

"New World" which is the first sequence of poems in "Islands" is an invocation:

*Nairobi's male elephants uncurl  
their trumpet to heaven  
Toot-Toot takes it up  
in Havana  
in Harlem ("Islands", 162).*

There is also a reference to music in this poem, which is Brathwaite's symbol for black creative inspiration. According to King (1980:7), Jazz is used as an analogy for poetic art. Various allusions to Jazz musicians, Jazz dances and Jazz styles offer an impression of the artist in the fallen world, symbolized by "New York, creating blues of the New World.

Section V of the sequence of the poems in *Islands* is called “Beginning”. It is a form of new beginning or renewal. In these poems, Brathwaite rejects the imitation of European culture which he thinks should not be imitated dogmatically and goes further to suggest the restoration of African roots in the new world:

*Now waking  
making  
making  
with their  
rhythms some-  
thing torn  
and new* (“Islands”, 270).

“Islands” thus embodies self-knowledge and the eventual restoration of the black man in the New World.

Finally, this work has attempted a discussion of the trope of ‘Africa’ in Caribbean literature, using Edward Brathwaite’s poetry as a launching pad. It has been rightly observed that the motif of ‘Africa’ in Brathwaite’s poetry has left us not only a historical but also literary legacy.

This remark proves illuminating enough when we come to consider the poetry of Brathwaite. Although the Caribbean literature remains inevitably distinct in that it also draws heavily on its immediate social and geographical environment, the Caribbean writers often attempt a literary transmigration into the African culture, norms, mores and artifacts. It is for this reason that the entire black literature, both African and Diaspora, may also in many cases be seen as a cohesive project.

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