

## Traditional Performing Arts and Self-Assertion in Caribbean Literature

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### Abstract

Caribbean poets, like their counterparts from other parts of the world, draw on traditional performing arts to represent African historical, cultural, social, political, and religious structures and ideologies. Their deep knowledge of African culture enables them to re-educate their people and Blacks all over the world on the importance of their cultural and national identities. This largely explains the presence of African cultural expressions in the musical variations of their poetry. Using the theory of Post-Structuralism, this study explores the style, locale, form, expression, and relevance of musical variations in selected poems of Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Audre Lorde, and Paule Marshall. Their poetry seeks to enhance cultural literacy, foster nationalist consciousness by celebrating Africa's historical past through songs of solidarity, and provide emotional support for Black Africans' struggles for freedom across the world. It also exposes how going back to African indigenous knowledge and heritage of traditional norms and values fosters self-assertion and actualization, needed for sustainable development of the contemporary African society.

**Keywords:** Performing arts, Culture, Ideology, Struggle for freedom, Self-actualization, Development

## Introduction

The legendary West Indian writer, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, is known for his performative verses, especially in his collection of poetry, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (1973). He draws inspiration from his African and Caribbean folk inheritance for this great poetry collection. Brathwaite, an Afro-Caribbean, has deep knowledge of his ancestry from his personal experiences as an exile in Ghana. Before he travelled to Ghana, his heart's desire had always been to bring an Afro-Caribbean tradition from the margin to the centre by displacing the European cultures imposed on African slaves. The European slave masters introduced a hegemonic educational system that dispossessed Black African slaves of their African cultures. They were taught the European ethos and told that everything African was primitive. Brathwaite, cited in Perrier (1973) emphasizes this by lamenting that: "African did not mean anything to anyone in Barbados; we never mentioned the word in our ten years of schooling. ... There was a question that we started at school about what West Indian culture is. But the answers we got were very vague" (p.18).

He left Barbados to study History and English at Cambridge, and after

graduating in 1953, he joined the British Colonial Service. Being influenced by T. S. Eliot during his time at Cambridge, he introduced the Black Africans' musical variations into poetry. He notes that Eliot influenced not only him but other Caribbean writers: "What T.S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of speaking voice, the conversational tone" (Brathwaite, 1984, p. 30). His desire for Jazz and other forms of music is seen in his first poem 'Shadow Suite' (BIM No 2 June 1950), but the Cambridge magazines were rejecting his poems. He confirms: "I read Keats, Conrad, Kafka. I was a man of culture. But the Cambridge magazines didn't take my poems. Or rather, they only took those which had a West Indian – to me, 'exotic' – flavour, I felt rejected and misunderstood" (Brathwaite, 1970, p. 37). These rejections increase his feeling of rootlessness. When he realizes that Wilson Harris, Samuel Selvon, and V.S. Naipaul are successful Caribbean novel writers in exile, he decides to accept himself and feels that there is no need for him to return to the Caribbean. He continues to see himself as a 'universal man' (Pearn, 1980, p. 228).

In 1955, he was posted to the Gold Coast (Ghana) in West Africa, and he lived there till 1962. He held several service posts

that took him to many rural areas where he had contact with the people every day. Zarinojooee and Khatar (2016, p. 234) assert that "understanding a society's tradition and belief equals understanding its cultural identity." So, Brathwaite's experiences with Africans and African culture rekindled his love for traditional folk inheritance. His deep knowledge of his African heritage and participation in ritual performances inspired his poetry, especially *The Arrivants*. Pederson (1993) asserts that knowledge of his African heritage also informed much of his scholarly works. Pearn (1985, p. 288), in support of this, rightly points out that: "His job in Primary education kept him in rural areas where he participated as a matter of activities which were traditional and relatively unaffected by overt European influences." Urama (2016, p. 282) stresses that "traditional performing arts foster the relationship between men in the society and with the divine and also their ancestors." Therefore, different ritual performances in Ghana led Brathwaite to have an encounter with his inner self, which released him from a state of personal and historical emptiness.

T.S. Eliot's works inspired other diasporic writers, too. Rohlehr (1981, p. 67) stresses that Ralph Ellison declared that

Elliot has helped him in the development of his folk inheritance by quoting Ellison thus: "writers like Eliot and Joyce made me conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance." Brathwaite and other African diasporic writers observed that traditional performing art has remained one of the most expressive forms of African visual culture. Performances, such as poetic chants, songs, music, dance, masquerade, and drama are integrated into a unified whole, forming part of traditional religious worship, burial and funeral rites, marriage and naming ceremonies, festivals, and social entertainments such as wrestling and peer group meetings. Urama (2012, p. 283) asserts that performing arts are inseparable, influencing each other considerably.

Using a post-structuralist approach, this study examines the style, locale, form, expression, and relevance of the musical variations in some selected poems from Brathwaite's *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*. It seeks to demonstrate how Brathwaite's poetry has influenced other Caribbean writers. These writers emphasize that reclaiming African heritage and indigenous knowledge fosters pride in Africanness among both continental and diasporic Black communities, and that embracing this

identity can contribute to the sustainable development of Africa and Caribbean societies in the New World. Post-structuralism is a literary theory associated with the works of Jacques Derrida and his followers, which began in France in the late 1960s. It proposes that human culture is best understood by language structure. This simply means that social reality is shaped by the power of discourse, and one can best explain one's society, every aspect of human experience, such as social habits, personal, cultural, and national identities, communication, norms, and values, through language. This implies the arbitrariness of every language is reflected in readers' textual analysis of every text. Nwabueze (2011) emphasizes that in post-structuralism, every reader of a text is expected to create a distinctive meaning to the text from the signifiers in the text. He further stresses that "the duty of the interpreter of a text is to use a diversity of standpoints to create a polygonal interpretation of the text, even if these interpretations are in conflict with one another" (p.137). Drawing from this assertion, it is not the author that evaluates his work but the readers/audience who are the critics of the text.

The meaning of every form of performance in *The Arrivants*, as analyzed in this study, lies in the readers' interpretations. Post-structuralism argues that "knowledge" is imposed on other people by those who are prominent and see themselves as "elites". The way the power of the elites is achieved is through the manipulation of discourse, and the strength of the dominant discourses lies in the elite's ability to shut out other opinions and see the thinking or culture of others as irrational. The study further exposes the evils of imposing European cultures on Black Africans through a hegemonic educational system and the undermining of African culture and tradition. Therefore, Post-Structuralism is relevant for this study.

### **The Socio-cultural Significance of Traditional Performing Arts in African and Caribbean Literature**

Through the incorporation of African traditional performing arts in African and African diasporic literature, indigenous knowledge has been integrated into the literature. It, therefore, promotes cultural and traditional beliefs, which in turn enhance indigenous knowledge. Titus and Ibidun (2012) emphasize that indigenous knowledge is often embedded in a people's cosmology and music. The first cultural aspect of Brathwaite's poetry is

seen in the language of his poems, which proves his knowledge and understanding of African and Caribbean culture as emphasized by Rohelhr (1981, p. 3), who asserts that Brathwaite's poetry portrays "the wholeness of self-knowledge of Afro-Caribbean Man". The customs and values of many African societies are going into extinction. Very little effort is made by the people to preserve such customs and values because of urbanization and Africans' preference for Western cultures. Unfortunately, in the 21st century, black Africans are still influenced by the colonial mentality. A good number of Africans, especially the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria, do not allow their children to speak their indigenous language. Some of them would ask: *Kedu ebe ejji Igbo eje?* which means, where does the Igbo language lead one to? It is worth noting that this kind of attitude has made many people culturally alienated from the Igbo society where they were born and grew up. Such parents employ private teachers to teach their children English and French. The cultural heritage of a people is their identity. Chinua Achebe, one of the founding fathers of African literature, and many other African writers of Igbo origin, integrate indigenous Igbo speech patterns in their works to rehabilitate Igbo culture.

Urama (2016) emphasizes that the integration of indigenous languages, as well as variants of the languages into African literature, is an important tool for the positive understanding of African literary works, and for cultural literacy. This submission gains credence in Achebe's use of Igbo dialects, orality, music, dance, masquerade, poetic chants, and his portrayal of customary justice and other forms of African traditional, social, political, and religious activities in his works, which proves that Africans have an organized culture before colonization. Achebe declares thus:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the one I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past, with all its imperfections, was not one dark night of savagery from which the first European acting on God's behalf delivered them (Achebe, 1975, p. 45).

Similarly, Brathwaite integrates Akan and Jamaican dialects into his poetry to assert that African languages and culture are not inferior to those of the Europeans. In it, he introduces something different from the Western literary tradition. The use of the original language of a people represented in a text is very important

because some words lose their meanings in translation. For the author to represent the exact meaning of his expression, he would have no option to employ the vernacular or original language of the people. Packman (1971) confirms that in most cases of translation, there is some digression in the original meaning of words.

According to Brathwaite (1978, pp. 292-293), "The Dust", written in Barbadian dialect, suffers rejection at the point of publication by Cambridge Magazines on the grounds of its "unintelligibility." Instead of the Editors accepting their ignorance and lack of knowledge of the culture expressed in the poem, they term it "unintelligibility". This proves that the reason why European culture is promoted to the detriment of African culture through the hegemonic educational system of the colonialists is to erase everything African from the blacks. They impose their own culture on Africans and African slaves to present them as morons. Brathwaite breaks the jinx by his use of African (Akan), Jamaican dialects, and Queen's English in his poems. In *Masks*, Akan is code-switched with Standard English in "Atumpan" (pp. 98-99), "Korabra" (pp. 132-134), "Bosompra" (pp. 136-137), "Kumasi" (pp. 138-140), "Tutu" (pp. 141-142), "Tano" (pp. 131-135), and

"The Awakening" (pp. 136-137). In "Islands," Jamaican dialects and Standard English are code-switched in "Francina" (pp. 214-215). In "Wake" (pp. 208-213) and "Negus" (pp. 222-224), Standard English is mixed with other Caribbean national languages.

Caribbean National Languages like Jamaican, Patois, and Creole are of great importance in literature because they bring out the everyday life of the Caribbean people. Representing them in literature has helped in the development of these national languages. Brathwaite (1993) sees national language as "the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean, not the official English now, but the language of slaves and labourers" (p. 260). Literature as a representation of life has to carry the people's everyday mode of communication. This verisimilitude also aids a better understanding of the works of literature because it shows that the writer had the interests of his audience in mind while writing. Achebe and many other African writers also use pidgin in their works to portray the everyday life of Africans. Some of the poems are written in pidgin to bring out the aesthetics of African performing arts. Amos Tutuola is well known for Yoruba-English, the language he employed in writing *The*

*Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), which is different from the structure of normal English, but ironically applauded by the West.

Another aspect of traditional performing art in Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* is the mask. Masquerade in African ideology is tied to ancestral worship. Nwabueze (2003) points out that 'the masquerade is a medium through which the living Igbos (people of Southeastern Nigeria) communicate with the living dead' (p. 76). Orie (2005) confirms that: 'dance originated from ritual performance and mask as a carrier of ritual performance forms a fraternity between mask and dance' (p. 226). This means that the title of Brathwaite's second part of his trilogy, *Masks*, is of great significance because 'masks links the people (Africans) with the traditions, sacred ideas and beliefs' (Orie, 2005, p. 226).

Brathwaite could not have been able to represent masks in his poetry so well if he had not participated in masquerade cults in Ghana. Masquerade cults are usually masculine cults, and most of the activities are sacred and kept secret from women and children. Urama (2012) points out that masquerades are used for the implementation of customary justice in settling disputes and other political

functions in Africa (pp. 295-298). Through Brathwaite's representation of the mask ritual-dancing expressions in his poetry, he wants Black Africans in the Caribbean and in all parts of the world to have the same experience he had in Africa. In these representations, he re-emphasizes that Black Africans, wherever they find themselves, have a common ancestry, and it is the same blood that runs through their veins. That is why he promotes homecoming to Africa and the Caribbean, encouraging all Blacks that are not in continental Africa to trace their ancestry back to Africa for the discovery of their authentic or primordial selves. To those who are not able to travel to Africa, incorporating these performing arts in literature is a way of passing the socio-cultural message from Africa to the New World. It will also help in reviving the remnant African culture and tradition in the New World, which has been the role of the writers in the diaspora. In "The Return", Brathwaite poetizes the poetic persona's coming into contact with the ancestral mystical Golden Stool of the Ashanti Kingdom and Osei Tutu, the legendary royal father of the Ashanti Kingdom. In "The Golden Stool" (pp. 143-146) through code-switching of Standard English and Akan; "Mampong says his shrine sit / heavier

upon the snake/time's coiled misfortune, than those at Berekum / the Akyems will not care their own *sum- / an*; it is the same at Juaben / their drums beat late on in the night, tall / reeds of coward's darkness / *hena beka, hena beka, hena beka* *yen!* / behind our wall, who dares touch / who dares to touch, who dares to touch us now!," he poeticizes how the Golden Stool is as old as the creation of *Manpong*, a state in Ashanti Federation by *Nana Nyankopong*, the creator of the universe who is called *Onyame* in the Akan Language. In this, he brings out the natural myths of creation through ritual performances of ancestral values.

Pearn (1985, p. 298) emphasizes that in *Masks*, Brathwaite makes "extensive use of Akan prayers, poems and songs, within the original language and in translations. It has a formal ritualistic quality."

Brathwaite's poems describe a search for individual identity as well as the Caribbean people's collective identity, hence, the poems are filled with the spiritual undertone of the prayers of a lost child seeking reconnection with his roots. Filled with images of reconnection to Africa, the collection helps to provide the cultural literacy that Blacks need in the New World for their self-assertion. Self-assertion is what would make the Blacks proud of their Africanness. Just

like Claude Mckay, one of the pioneer Jamaican writers who has published collections of dialect poetry rightly asserts that being in the New World did not make him to be cut off from his root (Africa): "I am conscious of my new world birthright as of my Africa origin, being aware of one and the significance in my development as much as I feel the other emotionally" (Mckay, 1973, p. 137). Ngugi (1981, pp. 4-5) also asserts that George Lamming, in his book, *Pleasures of Exile*, confirms that "the West Indian novel in English partly had its origin in a general quest for roots in the past."

Brathwaite also demonstrates his pride in his Africanness after participating in the ritual performances in Ghana, by taking an African (Akan) name, "Kamau". He affirms that, though he had formerly accepted his rootlessness, he has experienced a rebirth: "Accepting my rootlessness, I applied for works in London, Cambridge, Ceylon, New Delhi, Cairo, Kano, Khartoum, Sierra Leone, Carcassonne, a Monastery in Jerusalem" (Brathwaite, 1970, p.38). After his ritual performance in Ghana he declares his rebirth, thus:

I was a West Indian, roofless man of the world. I could go belonging everywhere on the worldwide

globe. I ended up in a village in Ghana. It was my beginning ... Slowly, slowly ever 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 (Brathwaite, 1970, p. 38).

Thus, the trope of Africa is one that scholars have continued to weigh in on. King-Aribisala (1991, p. 40) discloses that, "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." Brathwaite proves that he is a man of culture in the way he represented the culture of the Ashanti Kingdom, especially the activities of the traditional griots. He earlier shows his desire for Jazz and Blues, the music of the Blacks during his time at Cambridge, but his activities in Ghana brought him closer to many traditional performing artists in rural areas where he worked in Ghana. The

performing arts he watched and participated in influenced him, and his desires for other forms of cultural music are highlighted in his poems. Pederson (1993), in support of this, emphasizes that Brathwaite's penchant for Jazz, rhythmic experimentation, and his love of Caribbean vernacular are the most evident features of his poetry. Charles Kell, Julie Pearn, and Gorden Rohelhr assert that Brathwaite's word-breaking or word-division in his poems is a cracking quality of the blues (Kell, 1966, p. 16). It has also been rightly pointed out that:

The unconventional arrangement of sentences and words to give a sense of discontinuity and dislocation, the metromaniac disengagement from rudimentary lineational rules tripled with an ambitious deployment of some of the various tr-continental musical and speech rhythms are a spiritual witness of Brathwaite's poetry versatility. (Raji-Oyelade, 2005, p. 133)

This is portrayed in some of his poems like "The Journeys" (pp. 35-40) and "Caliban" (pp. 191-196). The following extract from 'Caliban' exemplifies an inconsequential arrangement of sentences and words:

E-  
gypt  
in Af-  
rica  
Mesopo-  
Tamia  
Mero-  
e (Braithwaite 1978, pp. 35)

And  
Ban  
Ban  
Cal-  
iban  
like to play  
pan  
at the Car-  
nival;  
Pran-  
cing up to the lim-  
bo silence ... (Braithwaite 1978,  
p.192)

In the above extract, the poet foregrounds the scattered and ill-arranged patterns of life he had lived. Participating in traditional African performing arts has also helped other diasporic writers achieve self-realization and self-actualization. Audre Lorde also declares her rebirth in Africa after participating in African traditional worship with the women of Dahomey. She joins other women in dancing around

the shrine of Mawulisa and Seboulisa goddesses, and the experience changed her life. In her poem "Dahomey", she declares that her initiation into the Shango sisterhood and the ritual performance not only helped her find her true self and redefine womanhood but also in the development of her career as a poet, thus:

It was in Abomey that I felt  
the full blood of my fathers' wars  
and where I found my mother  
Seboulisa  
standing with outstretched hip  
high (lines 3-7)

Thunder is a woman with  
braided hair  
spelling the fas of Sgango  
asleep between sacred pythons  
that cannot read  
nor eat the ritual offerings  
of the Asein  
My throat in the panther's hair  
is unresisting

Bearing two drums on my head I  
speak  
whatever language is needed  
to sharpen the knives of my  
tongue  
the snake is aware although  
sleeping

sunder my blood  
since I am a woman whether or  
not  
you are against me  
I will braid my hair  
even  
in the season of rain. (lines 21-  
38) (Lorde 1978, pp. 10-11)

In Audre Lorde's "The Women of Dan Dance with Swords in Their Hands to Mark the Time When Their Were Warriors" she declares her rebirth into a real African woman who is not an Anglophone weaker-sex woman but an African womanist warrior:

I came like as a woman  
dark and open  
some times I fall like night  
softly  
and terrible  
only when I must die  
in order to rise again

I do not come like a secret warrior  
with an unsheathed sword in my  
mouth  
holding behind my tongue  
slicing my throat to ribbons  
of service with smile  
while the blood runs down and  
out

through holes in the two scared  
mounds  
on my chest  
  
I come like a woman  
who I am  
spreading out through nights  
laughter and promise  
and dark heat  
warning whatever I touch  
that is living  
consuming  
only  
what is already dead (lines 7-  
32) (Lorde, 1978, pp. 14-15)

Like Brathwaite, Lorde, therefore, incorporates Mawulisa and Seboulisa figures into her poetry - *The Black Unicorn* (1978) to celebrate her authentic self and to promote Black Africans' homecoming to continental Africa for the discovery of their primordial selves. Through Mawulisa and Seboulisa figures, she redefines Black womanism; these figures, from African cultural inheritance, stand side by side with European female figures. The cultural figures also help her in developing her poetry, just like the cultural figures from Ashanti in Ghana helped Brathwaite in developing his poetry.

Paule Marshall in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) presents Avetara (Avey) Johnson, who, after participating in the Beg pardon ancestral dance at the Island of Carriacou, achieves self-realization also. Participating in this dance is the first time Avey is acquainted with her people and relatives, and she realizes her true self. The ritual dance reminds her of Great Aunt Cuney, who taught her some African culture when she was a little girl. It also reminds her of South Carolina, USA, where she was born, and Barbados, where her parents came from. Urama (2016) points out that "these two important places remind Avey of Africa, her ancestry" (p. 136). Thus:

She began to dance then. Just as her feet of their own accord had discovered the old steps, but hips under the linen shirtdress slowly began to weave from side to side on their own, stiffly at the first and then in a smooth wide arc as her body responded more deeply to the music. And the movement in her hips flowed upward so that her entire torso was soon swaying. Arms bent, she began working her shoulders in the way the Shouters long ago used to do, thrusting them forward and the back to a strong casting-off

motion. Her weaving head was arched high. All of her moving suddenly with vigour and passion she hadn't felt in years, and with something of the stylishness and sass she had once been known for. "*Girl you can out-jangle Bojangles*," Jay saying it with amazement at the Saturday night pretend dances when he would turn the floor over to her (Marshall, 1983, pp. 249-250).

Avey dances so well that every participant in the annual Beg Pardon ritual dance and Joseph Lebert and his daughter quickly began to copy from her. Other dancers copied from Avey too. This is to highlight how one's reconnection to one's ancestors is a source of vitality. It also portrays how cultural identity brings about harmonious and peaceful co-existence. The participants bow to Avey as they sing and dance:

To her utter bewilderment others in the crowd of aged dancers ... began doing the same. One after another of the men and women trudging past, who were her senior by years, would pause as they reached her and turning briefly in her direction, tender her deep, almost reverential bow.

Then, singing, they would continue on their way (*Praisesong*, pp. 250–251).

This is where the title of the novel, *Praisesong for the Widow* is drawn. They praise her for being the carrier of their ancestral heritage:

One elderly woman not only bowed but stepped close and took her hand. Cataracts dimmed her gaze. ... and holding on to Avey Johnson's hand she peered close, ..."And who you is?" And as a mystified Avey Johnson gave her name, she suddenly remembered her great-aunt Cuney's admonition long ago. The old woman used to insist, on pain of switching, that whenever anyone in Tatem, even another child, asked her her name she was not to say simply "Avey," or even "Avey Williams." But always "Avey, short for Avatara." (*Praisesong*, p. 251)

Urama (2016, p. 136) also stresses that: "As Avey finally discovers whom she is on the Island of Carriacou, she is healed from her psychosomatic sickness." The selected African diasporic literatures, both poetry and prose, portray social realism. African indigenous knowledge

acquired from these literatures would continue to breed nationalists who will struggle for the sustainable development of Africa.

Another cultural heritage incorporated in Brathwaite's poems is drumming. The drum is a very significant musical instrument in African tradition. Important and special messages are sent through drumming, especially where some group of people are not expected to understand what is communicated. It is called *Ikoro* or *Ikolo* in the Igbo language, and the Igbo adage has it that *Ikoro* calls a man two times in his lifetime: when he is born and at his death. This is to portray that *Ikoro* is used to announce the births and deaths of prominent people in Igbo society. It is also used to summon people for war in traditional Igbo society, and on each of the occasions, it sounds differently. Chinua Achebe represents this during the death of Oguefi Ezendu in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Talking drums are of great importance in Yoruba land, in Western Nigeria. It is used for poetic chants in royal palaces. All palace griots must be talented in drumming because they carry out their function either orally or instrumentally. Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka also represent this in *The Gods are not to Blame* (1971) and *Death and the King's Horsemen* (1975), respectively.

Braithwaite, in representing orality in his poems, employs the West African (Ashanti) and West Indian griots' style of chanting praises to the ancestors.

Braithwaite starts *Masks* with the Akan proverb: "*Only a fool points at his origins with his left hand*", while in *Libation*, he poetizes his initiation rituals. In "*Prelude*" of the *Libation*, he highlights his communion with the *Asase Yaa*, the Earth Mother, and *Nana Frimpong*, the ancestor of the Ashanti. Thus:

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: (Braithwaite 1978, p. 91)

Nana Frimpong  
once you were here  
hoed the earth  
and left it for me  
green rich ready  
with yam shoots, the  
tuberous smooth of cassava  
(Braithwaite, 1978, p. 91)

In *The Making of the Drum*, the poet underscores the centrality of the drum,

along with gourds, rattles, the gong-gong, the drummer, and the griot, as essential instruments for invoking the spirit of the ancestors. In *The Gong-Gong*, he declares that the gods remain dumb until they hear the sounds of musical instruments, highlighting that many musical instruments are played simultaneously to awaken them.

God is dumb  
until the drum  
speaks.

The drum  
is dumb  
until the gong-gong leads

it. Man made,  
the gong-gong's  
iron eyes

of smile  
walk us through the humble  
dead to meet

the dumb  
blind drum  
where Odomankoma speaks  
(Braithwaite, 1978, p. 97)

Similarly, Paule Marshall also represents Drumming and its importance in *Praisesong of the Widow*. The Big Drum is

very instrumental in the Beg Pardon dance, an annual festival used to communicate with the ancestors to ask for their forgiveness, protection and provision. It links the people to their living dead. Marshall emphasizes this and also highlights that drumming, prayer of supplication, singing and dancing go together in the ritual performance. Thus:

Outside their kneeling circle, the other had fallen silent. All movement had ceased in the yard. And in the silence, the stillness, Lebert Joseph slowly opened his arms, raised his tremendous head to the sky and, abruptly, like a shock wave on the air: "Pa'doné mwê ...!"

"Si mwê mérîte/Pini mwê mérîte/Pini mweê/Si mwê ba mérîte/Pa'doné mwê ..." –singing in his quavering yet piercing falsetto.

"Is the 'Beg Pardon,'" Milda whispered and bowed her head

Avey Johnson nodded, remembering. It was the first song he had sprung on her yesterday, no more than twenty minutes after she had entered the rum shop (*Praisesong*, p. 236).

This traditional practice is similar to the Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves presented in Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964). The feast is a very important purification ceremony at which the people of Umuaro gather in the marketplace with pumpkin leaves for individual and communal cleansing. They offer prayers to the gods and cast the pumpkin leaves to the Chief Priest of Ulu. Achebe explains that the performance of the feast starts with the beating of the *ogone* (metal gong) for its announcement by the town crier:

Gome Gome Gome Gome. 'Folks of the village, The Chief Priest of Ulu has asked me to tell every man and every woman that the Festival of the First Pumpkin Leave will be held on the coming Nkwo market day.' Gome Gome Gome Gome.  
(Achebe, 1964, p.65)

On the day of the festival, the marketplace would be filled by men and women. The *ogene* for the announcement of the arrival of Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu would sound again. The sound of *Ikolo* (the Big Drum) that salutes the Chief Priest follows. Women wave their pumpkin leaves side to side and get ready to offer their prayers of supplication. The

appearance of the Chief Priest would be welcomed with a loud shout that would be heard in all the neighbouring villages. He will dance the traditional dancing steps of the *Ikolo* and respond to the instrumental praises on him thus: "Speak on", he said to it, 'Ezeulu hears what you say.' Then he stooped and danced three or four steps and rose again" (Achebe, 1964, p. 70). Carrying *Nne ọfọ* (mother of all staff of authority) on his right hand, he renders praises to the deity, Ulu and goes to the centre of the marketplace. Achebe emphasizes that: "He struck the metal staff into the earth and left it quivering while he danced a few steps into the *Ikolo* which had not paused for breath since the priest emerged. All the women waved their pumpkin leaves in front of them" (Arrow, p. 72). Suddenly he will pull the staff out of the ground with his left hand as he is still carrying the *Nne ọfọ* with his right hand. He will jump forward and start running around the marketplace. Women will utter their prayers and throw the pumpkin leaves at him as he runs near to them. Achebe presents the prayer from Ugoye:

*'Great Ulu who kills and saves, I implore you to cleanse my household of all defilement. If I have spoken it with my mouth or*

*seen it with my eyes, or if I have heard it with my ears or stepped on it with my foot or if it has come through my children or my friends or kinsfolk let it follow these leaves.'*

She waved the small bunch in a circle round her head and flung it with all her power at the Chief Priest as he ran past her position (Achebe, 1964, p. 72).

It is also worthy to note that the supplication prayers of the Beg Pardon are for oneself, family members, neighbours, friends, well-wishers and everyone in the society just as that of the Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves is for the entire society. Thus:

Once Lebert Joseph offered up the opening statement of the song, his relatives behind him on the ground quickly joined in the singing. And he makeshift drum that had been silent all along began a solemn measure. Arms opened, faces lifted to the darkness, the small band of supplicants endlessly repeated the few lines that comprised the Beg Pardon, pleading and petitioning not only for themselves and for the friends and neighbours

present in the yard, but for all far-flung kin as well – the sons and daughters, grands and great-grands in Trinidad, Toronto, New York, London ... (*Praisesong*, p. 236).

Performing arts as they are presented in these literary texts are natural myths and bring about a transcendental union of soul or mind of the people with the divine reality or divinity. Literature, especially oral literature is a carrier of natural mysticism. Songs, music, drumming, dance, poetic chants, mask, ancestral worship places or shrines or their representatives and libation in these poems provide a direct communication or spiritual intuition of divine truth for the Africans. Raji-Oyelade (2005, p. 127) asserts that: "*The Arrivants* is primarily about the journeying and related experiences, the search for spiritual denseness, creative fecundity and communion. As such, the overarching concern of the poet, interpretable in the text, is the reappraisal of self and society." This is the major reason why the expressive forms of Brathwaite's poetry contribute emotional support to Black Africans struggling for freedom in the continent and diaspora.

Brathwaite through these poems promotes national tradition in the art, dance and music of Black Africans. African indigenous languages, Caribbean national languages, and indigenous folk expressions which had been sidelined or neglected in literary tradition as non-Western are introduced. Dawes (1999, p. 9) confirms that by stressing that: "Western literary models were followed more closely until experiments of Kamau Brathwaite, Wilson Harris, and others began to define a Caribbean aesthetics in the 1960s" (p. 9).

### **Traditional Performing Arts and African Indigenous knowledge**

Achebe, Rotimi and Soyinka have been cited in this study as examples of many continental African writers who incorporate traditional performance into their works, while Marshall and Lorde serve as examples of African Diasporic writers engaging with similar themes. With Brathwaite and indeed Marshall's representation of ritual performances in their works, one can see that they have created relational Caribbean communities to African communities through their deeper indigenous knowledge. The drumming, songs, dance, music and chants are deployed for the purpose of solidarity, calling on Black Africans to go back to their cultural heritage. Akyea

(1971) in support that African literature equips the readers with an understanding of indigenous knowledge of the past quotes Shelton's assertion that:

"African literature arises from the mirrors the African Community and historical experience of Africa ... like other artefacts of a culture, the literary work is not an island into itself, and to study it in isolation can be misleading. Knowledge of the society avoids provincialism in the making of judgement." (Akyea, 1971, p. 117)

Avetara Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow* just like Brathwaite has done through his writings dedicated her remaining years to inculcating indigenous knowledge to her generation. She understands the importance of cultural identity and tries to extend it to her children and grandchildren so that they would pass it to the generation unborn.

Tatem. Avey Johnson found herself thinking of the house her great-aunt had left her. By the time the plane touched down in Grenada, she had made up her mind to fix it up. Or if it was beyond repair, to build a new one in its place. Sell the house in North White Plains as Marion had

been urging her to do for years and use the money to build in Tatem.

It would be a vacation house, and once she retired she would live part of the years there. And each summer she would ask that two grandsons he sent to spend time with her in Tatem, especially the youngest one, who had known the value of dime-stores xylophone. If forced to, she would be as tyrannical in demanding that they be sent at her great-aunt had been with her (Marshall, 1978, 256).

Other African and African diasporic writers draw on the cultural affirmations and indigenous knowledge embedded in their works. Audre Lorde, for instance, redefined womanhood by invoking African indigenous warrior women, thereby providing a framework for subsequent feminist writers to develop their creativity. The traditional performing arts represented in African and African diasporic literature, therefore, provide the indigenous knowledge needed to build nationalists that will continue the freedom struggle and the fight for the development of Africa.

## Conclusion

Brathwaite and other Caribbean poets such as Audre Lorde and Paule Marshall as well as African writers who engage their works as writers and teachers must re-educate Black Africans in the Caribbean and the diaspora on the significance of African history and culture in reclaiming their roots and identity. By incorporating performing arts into their works, these writers seek to awaken the consciousness of African cultural values and indigenous knowledge in order to build true Black Africans who would continue the struggle for total freedom of the Blackman. Through their

representations of the African history of slavery, and African worldview, as well as belief, political, social, economic, cultural, and religious systems, and mode of communication, they demonstrate that every culture and language embodies its own wisdom and knowledge. This suggests that no single language or culture can serve as a universal standard of knowledge. Instead, these writers emphasize that cultural identity and indigenous knowledge are essential to the self-actualization of Africans at home and diaspora, for the development of both Africa and the New World.

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