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AFRICAN POSSESSION RITUALS IN THE NOVELS OF EARL LOVELACE*

Africans were, of course, not the only group exploited in the creation of the New World, but the nature of their capture and the condition of their enslavement were definitely the most brutal, and this brutality was for a long period of time. In spite of the nature and span of the brutality and in spite of the conscious and concerted attempts to erase the memory of Africa from the mind of the New World African, however, the level and vitality of cultural retention, re-incarnation, interpretation and re-interpretation in the New World demonstrate the survival capability of the African spirit. Two of the factors responsible for the resilience of the New World African are of immediate interest.

The first factor hinges on the fact that the societies of Africa from which the African had been taken were non-literate societies with established structures for verbal and meta-verbal dissemination of knowledge from person to person and from one generation to the next. Secondly, these societies would have been organized around religious practices and rituals which defined the totality of their world view, with the notion of cosmic harmony being directly linked to the individual's and the community's performance of stipulated rituals and the observance of community-sanctioned taboos.

Africans brought to the New World would have, as part of their civic duties, participated in family, clan, and village rituals prior to their abduction and forced relocation. Since the

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festivals associated with such rituals would have underscored the collective character of the group and the specific identity and role of the individual, they would have formed the basis of the memory that Africans brought with them from Africa.

Exile concentrates the mind on home and oppression forces the mind to contemplate the past, if only to search for instances of better times. Africa, with its ritual protocol, would, undoubtedly, have, therefore, provided the source of such instances in the mind of the exiled and enslaved New World African. In an effort to exist in a harmonious relationship with their new landscape, they would have also carried out, albeit, mentally or in secret, the rituals associated with the forces of nature and would have called on spiritual energies from their past to protect and help them in their struggle against the unjust system of enslavement. Eventually, these rituals would have become the basis of a sacred unity and the collective reminder of life in Africa. Little wonder, then, that every effort was made by the colonial authority to demonize and ban these rituals and associated icons like drums, songs and dances.

Andrew Salkey (*A Quality of Violence*, 1959), George Lamming (*Season of Adventure*, 1960), Sylvia Wynter (*The Hills of Hebron*, 1962) and Orlando Patterson (*Children of Sisyphus*, 1964) were among the earliest West Indian novelists to examine the manifestation of Africa in the Africa-inspired religious practices of the New World. More recently, Olive Senior has revisited this phenomenon in her excellent short story, "Discerner of Hearts" (1995). Among the first generation of West Indian novelists to contemplate the spirit of Africa in the New World, Lamming's effort is perhaps the most illuminating. In *Season of Adventure*, which is based on the Haitian Ceremony of the Souls, Lamming affirms the existence of a vibrant African spirit in the New World. The Ceremony of the Souls is regarded by the Haitian practitioners of voodoo, an Africa-inspired religion, as a solemn communication between the living and the dead. During the ceremony, the dead return to offer, through the medium of the Houngan (Priest), a full and honest account of their relationship with the living. The African

antecedent of this ceremony is the Masquerade Cult (the Cult of Ancestors) which manifests, in concrete and imagistic terms, the African rendezvous with the past. But in *Salt* (1996), Earl Lovelace both reiterates the African ethos in the New World and advances it beyond the metaphorical into becoming the source of a unique magically realistic narrative technique. Lovelace's journey to this point is instructive of the nature of the spirit of Africa in the New World.

Earl Lovelace was born on 13 July 1935 in Toco, Trinidad, but he left Trinidad at the age of three for Tobago to live with his maternal grandparents both of whom were Christians of the Methodist persuasion. "In the house of my grandfather," Lovelace recollects, "there were two activities at least for adults: Work and Church. My grandfather collected the collection in the Methodist church and we went with him every Sunday." In that house, "we couldn't sing calypso, nobody played mas, carnival; all these were activities of the Devil... Everything bad was black..."¹ It was not until he returned to Trinidad, between the age of eleven and twelve, that he was introduced to the Spiritual Baptist church with its Africa-inspired ethos:

One night my mother took me to a service in the Spiritual Baptist church. My mother was something of a renegade, perhaps being in Trinidad made her one, maybe she needed deeper spiritual guidance than was afforded her in the other religions. She quietly wanted to be a Spiritual Baptist....I went to church and it registered. There was something here. I remember it very well. A girl of about fifteen from the neighbourhood was being prepared for baptism and she had just come out of the mourning ground and she acted out her travels in the spirit.²

Lovelace's first two novels, *While Gods Are Falling* (1965) and *The Schoolmaster* (1968) contain only a few direct or indirect references to the spirit of Africa. *While Gods Are Falling* examines the struggles of a young man who has abandoned his rural roots for a city that turns out to be violent and dehumanizing. Walter Castle's struggles and musing about Port of Spain could easily have been variations on a Joycean character in a Joycean city. *The Schoolmaster* sets out to capture the culture of the cocoa Spanish group which, Lovelace

remembers, his family was always anxious to identify with. But by *The Wine of Astonishment* (1982), however, he has decided to examine the spiritual terrain to which his mother had introduced him as a young boy. In a 1977 interview with Victor Questel, Lovelace reveals that *The Wine of Astonishment*, then in manuscript form, "dealt with the Baptists....It also was the first novel in which I decided to be Black....I wanted to make a definite statement. I think I wanted to establish the character's blackness, establish where they came from. If you look at *The Schoolmaster* you will see that, although one was able to identify people, there is no colour at all. You will not find the word 'black', although one gets the impression while reading it that one is talking about black people. The word 'white' is used once with reference to the priest."³

As in Lamming's *Season of Adventure*, it is the educated characters in *The Wine of Astonishment* who refuse to appreciate the power of the spirit of Africa in the New World. When Bee deliberately breaks the law prohibiting the Africa-inspired method of worship of the Spiritual Baptist and he is hauled before a "red-nigger magistrate sitting down high up, like God, with his face puff up like a frog that vex for seven days and his lips clamp down like the two saucers of a oyster," Bee asks, why, "in a country with so many different people, where they have religion for Hindu and Moslem and Anglican and Catholics,...it could be a crime for black people to worship as Spiritual Baptist?" The magistrate responds by castigating Bee for leading his followers astray, "making them jump and prance and shout to the devil as if you still in the wilds of Africa" and warns that "no civilized country will allow you to worship in this barbarous, heathen way." (p.73) Here then is an educated black person who fails to understand that the manner of worship of the Spiritual Baptist is an instance of the possession of the New World African by the spirit of Africa, and that, in the words of Bee, "the church is Africa in us, black in us...." (p.133)

Beside the church, the spirit of Africa is present in the tradition of warriorhood represented by Bolo, the tragic hero of *The Wine of Astonishment*. On a literary level, an intertextual analysis of this novel and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* will show how very similar Bolo is to Okonkwo. They are both defenders of their communities - Okonkwo's exalted social status is derived, in large measure, from his prowess as a wrestler; Bolo's derives from his dexterity as a stickfighter. In both cases, they are angry that their communities have refused to challenge the new dispensations which threaten the essential spirit of their cultures. They both decide to act on their own and are defeated. However, rather than commit suicide like Okonkwo, Bolo turns his anger and strength against his society. Ironically, the society has to rely on agents of the new dispensation to execute Bolo. This irony also recalls the ultimate indignity visited on Okonkwo, who, because Umuofian custom insists that a man who commits suicide may not be buried by his clansmen, has to be taken down and buried by agents of the same colonial government he had fought against and which had been instrumental in creating the conditions leading to his suicide.

In addition to the literary echoes of Achebe in this novel, there is the more fundamental relationship between the stickfighting tradition employed by Lovelace as a metaphor for manliness/manhood and African rituals, especially the coming of age initiation, and the masquerade culture. An integral part of masquerade festivals in Africa is the clash between whip-wielding followers of masquerades which is really a stickfighting session involving opposing groups. Also, among the Fulani people of Nigeria, there is the *sharro* ritual during which a young man who is about to take a wife has to be put to the test of manhood by being whipped in public. If he shows pain or runs away, he will find no maiden willing to marry him.⁴ The stickfighting tradition in the New World is, perhaps, an aggregate of the various similar traditions in Africa, and Bolo must, therefore, be seen as a New World manifestation of an Old World tradition.

By the time we get to *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979) which, although published before *The Wine of Astonishment* (1982), was written after it, we are confronted with a New World tradition that owes its impetus to the African Cult of Ancestors and its complementary masquerade tradition. The African world view insists that death is not life's terminal stage; death only signifies the dematerialization of the soul and its transformation into the realm of immortality. In order to encourage the now elevated ancestors to do right by them, the living celebrate and activate their ancestors, especially within the context of festivals of ancestors, the highlight of which is the "physical manifestation" (as masquerades) of ancestors, managed and executed by members of the cult of ancestors.⁵

Both J.D.Elder and Maureen Warner-Lewis have examined the manifestation of African impulses in the Caribbean, especially in Carnival and Carnival related activities, and have drawn attention to the coincidence of world view between Africa and the Caribbean. In his portrayal of carnival and of Aldrick Prospect as the High Priest of the Dragon masquerade, Lovelace consciously draws attention to that coincidence of world view:

Up on the Hill Carnival Monday morning breaks upon the backs of these shacks with no cock's crow, and before the mist clear, little boys, costumed in old dresses, their heads tied, holding brooms made from the ribs of coconut palm leaves, blowing whistles and beating kerosine tins for drums, move across the face of the awakening Hill, sweeping yards in a ritual, heralding the masqueraders' coming, that goes back for its beginnings, back across the Middle Passage, back to Mali and to Guinea and Dahomey and Congo, back to Africa when Maskers were sacred and revered, the keepers of the poison and heads of secret societies, and such children went before them, clearing the

ground, announcing their coming to the huts before which they would dance and make their terrible cries, affirming for the village, the tribe, warriorhood and femininity, linking the villagers to their ancestors, their Gods, remembered even now, so long after the Crossing, if not in the brain, certainly in the blood....(p.120)

Aldrick, the ritual medium, approaches his task of mask-making and mask-carrying with the determination, dedication and faith of an African priest or ritual carver: "In truth, it was in a spirit of priesthood that Aldrick addressed his work; for, the making of his dragon costume was to him always a new miracle, a new test not only of his skill but of his faith: for though he knew exactly what he had to do, it was only by faith that he could bring alive from these scraps of cloth and tin that dragon, its mouth breathing fire, its tail threshing the ground, its nine chains rattling, that would contain the beauty and the threat and terror that was the message he took to Port of Spain." (pp.35-36). While the possession of the faithful in *The Wine of Astonishment* is primarily a religious experience (which Bolo would like to see translated into a tool for the liberation of the oppressed), Aldrick, under the influence of the dragon costume, combines the spiritual with the political and feels "a sense of entering a sacred mask that invested him with an ancestral authority to uphold before the people of this Hill, this tribe marooned so far from the homeland that never was their home, the warriorhood that had not died in them, their humanness that was determined not by their possession of things" (p.120). He becomes ideologically possessed and is set on a mission designed to let his people behold their beauty and "uphold the unending rebellion they waged, huddled there on this stone and dirt hill hanging over the city like the open claws on a dragon's hand, threatening destruction if they were not recognized as human beings" (p.121). In essence, Aldrick is here affirming that the omen of Africa which had been central to the evolution of such diverse phenomena as the Maroon and Rastafarian sub-cultures in Jamaica, the Orisa and Spiritual Baptist faiths in Trinidad and Tobago, the *susu* banking system, and the musical and grammatically rebellious dialects of the region, will always be crucial in any attempt by

the New World African to subvert all manners of enslavement. Based on the intensity with which Aldrick embraces his duty as a mask-maker and mask-carrier, he can be said to function like the ritual carrier in Africa who is transformed into the carrier of the anguish of his people, manifests their hopes, and offers himself as the medium through whom the message from the future-in-the-past/present can be delivered. In his role as a ritual carrier, Aldrick anticipates the narrator of *Salt* (1995) who, although not the central character, functions as the vessel through whom the consciousness of the major characters is revealed and examined.

In *Salt*, which affirms the efficacy of the memory of another life, another time, another place, against the foreground of the here and now; which articulates the need to revisit and revision the West's blameless version of its contact with Africa; which affirms the need to assess the psyche of victim and victimizer; and which underscores the need for reparation as the central requirement in the move towards socio-psychic wholeness, Africa operates at several levels.⁶ Its theme of reparation locates it within the context of the relationship between Africa and Europe in particular, and Africa and the Western world in general. In "The On-Going Value of Our Indigenous Culture," his reflection on the history of the New World African, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Trinidad and Tobago's independence, Lovelace laments the absence of the African from that history but goes on to affirm:

Fortunately, we have another source of history: for although we have very few accounts from Africans of those times as to what they did and what they thought, what we do have are their dances and their songs and their stories. We dance those dances and sing those songs and tell those stories today in Best Village. These songs, dances and stories, I want to suggest are a living source of our authentic history. When we look at our dances and listen to our songs, when we experience the vitality and power of the steelband and hear a stickfight chant and watch the leaps and dexterity of the bongo

dance and the self affirmation and sauciness of the bele or the brisk affirming energy of pique, we know we have a history of ourselves as subjects. It has not been erased, for it is carried in our bodies....

Like the dances, other cultural forms have been utilised to express a sense of personhood, and if we examine them we will discover that behind them are a set of ideas which have served Africans as their strategy and philosophy in their confrontation with enslavement and colonialism.

These ideas, handed down in our art and culture, have given us our attitude to life and to each other. These I call our tradition.⁷

Salt presents and acknowledges Africans as the people who were *forced* to lay the groundwork of the Caribbean culture and to struggle against enslavement and colonialism, and as the "only group that was forced to address the Caribbean landscape with radically new eyes...."⁸ Against such a background, Uncle Bango emerges as the quintessential Lovelace warrior hero. His stickfighting exploit, his refusal to be blinded by materialism, and his wealth of stories, combine to make him a source of fascination and inspiration for the impressionable young narrator of the novel. Of Uncle Bango's many stories, it is the one about the flying Guinea John (the ancestor of the Durity clan) with which the novel opens which best articulates the complexity of the relationship between Africa and the New World:

Two months after they hanged his brother Gregoire, king of the Dreadnoughts band, and Louis and Nanton and Man Man, the other three leaders of African secret societies, who Hislop the governor claimed to be ringleaders of an insurrection that had a plan, according to the testimony of a mad white woman, to use the cover of the festivities of Christmas day to massacre the white and free coloured people of the island, Jo-Jo's great-grandfather, Guinea John, with his black jacket on and a price of two hundred

pounds sterling on his head, made his way to the East Coast, mounted the cliff at Manzanilla, put two corn cobs under his armpits and flew away to Africa, taking with him the mysteries of levitation and flight, leaving the rest of the family still in captivity mourning over his selfishness, everybody putting in their mouth and saying, 'You see! You see! That is why Blackpeople children doomed to suffer: their own parents refuse to pass on the knowledge that they know to them.'

And some of them only stopped badmouthing the old man when just over a year later he appeared to his eldest daughter Titi in a dream to let her know that the reason he left so abruptly wasn't because he was a wanted man, was because his first wife who he had been dragged away from in Abeokuta, when they captured him and brought him enslaved to this island, was sick unto death and wanted to see him before she died. He really wasn't happy at his children cursing him. It wasn't a good sign. He knew they had a heavy load to carry; but when a people begin to curse their elders, the next step they take is to curse their gods. He loved his children. It was their living that would make him an ancestor. His wisdom was theirs to have; but they had eaten salt and made themselves too heavy to fly. So, because now their future would be in the islands, he preferred not to place temptation in their way by revealing to them the mysteries of flight. (p.3)

Salt is the story of the young narrator's apprenticeship under an Uncle Bango who has embraced Guinea John's prophecy that the future of the New World African is in the New World. In the true tradition of the warrior, Uncle Bango insists on his dignity as a person. In the eyes of the narrator's mother, however, Uncle Bango is not an appropriate role model. She would rather that his son look up to Alford George, the iconoclastic school teacher who gives up on his dream of migrating and opts to prepare children of the village for the College Exhibition examination which determines whether they go to college or stay in the village, mired in poverty. But the more the narrator finds out about Alford,

the more he realizes that Alford's vision of self and community and that of Uncle Bango are very similar and that they are, each in his own way, products of the spirit of Africa in the New World. For example, it takes the intervention of the *orisa* for Alford to speak at age seven. Towards the end of the novel, Alford, politically embattled, with a little prodding from Florence (the narrator's aunt and Alford's lover), returns to his *orisa* roots in search of refuge, twinning the present and the past:

[Alford] was back to being a child of seven when he was part of the ceremony to get him to talk, beside him his mother, before him Mother Ethel large in her dress of many layers of cotton, her hands in his, her breathing bosom heaving out her mothersmell, the smell of the wax of burning candles. As the praying went on, he felt himself taken back past that past, beyond the mysteries of that ceremony to the edge of a chasm he could not cross. Africa was out there. Out there was part of his self that at once he longed to recover, to reclaim and so reclaim a wholeness for himself. He strained to reach back to that child, to that past that he felt belonged to him. And he could feel it, sense it, right there behind the wall, behind Mother Ethel and the Orishas, behind Ogun and Damballa and Yemanja and Shango. It was there, out there, with Africa, out of reach. (p.256)

Alford comes away from this thanksgiving ritual with a sense of the loss of heritage or of the sense of loss inherent in not having had a heritage to lose. This feeling crystallizes for him the nature of the loss for which Uncle Bango demands a public redress. This epiphany opens the way for Alford to join forces with Uncle Bango: the educated New World African, now possessed by the spirit of Africa, joins forces behind/with the uneducated New World African, always possessing the spirit of Africa.

As a novel about stories - the stories of all the people who have touched and shaped the landscape of the New World -, *Salt* raises questions about how much of the contents of a story originates in the consciousness of the storyteller and/or the community; and how much of the consciousness of a story

or the power of the events in the story invades the consciousness of the storyteller and, by extension, forces him/her to tell it in a particular way.

As a means of suggesting the complex relationship between story, storyteller, and the contending perceptions of history, reality and orality inherent in the story, Lovelace adopts the use of multiple narrative voices and a mixed narrative pattern. In the account of Alford's relationship with his class, for example, there is a constant shift from the third person narrator to first person narrator, even within the same sentence:

He took *them* to spend a day in the shade of the botanical gardens among hundreds of trees of rare and foreign trees that he told *us* Sir Ralph Woodford had directed his gardener David Lockhart to plant back in the year 1816. He took *them* to the pitch lake where Sir Walter Raleigh stopped to caulk his ships on his way to Eldorado, and had *us* standing in terrified awe at the thought that a whole village of Arawak Indians, their animals and dwelling places had been swallowed in one night many years ago by an eruption of the lake. (pp.61-62; italics added).

In addition to his use of the mixed narrative mode, Lovelace employs a multi-vocal, sublimated first person narrator who is regularly possessed and deployed by other characters to reiterate their versions and consciousness of their stories. This narrative technique approximates the behaviour of the medium in *orisa* and in other Africa-inspired rituals who loses his or her voice and personality and is inhabited by and sublimated to the voice and distinctive personality traits of the possessing deity. In spite of the desire of his mother to steer him clear of Bango and his stories, the narrator, like a finely primed *orisa* medium under the irresistible control of the mounting deity, is constantly ridden by Uncle Bango's stories and the memory of the ancestors lodged in them. The narrator becomes the living voice of the future possessed and controlled by the vision of the present (represented by Alford, his school teacher)

and the past (represented by Uncle Bango, his uncle/the storyteller).

During some of these moments of narrative possessions, Lovelace dispenses with quotation marks, creating the illusion that the narrator is still narrating when in fact it is the voice of the subject of the narration and not that of the narrator which has taken control of the narration. In such instances, the internal logic of the comments and the language (especially the register) function to indicate that both stories and narrations are located outside the narrator. The first person narrator's account of his aunt's sojourn in Port of Spain is one of the many instances of this technique. Placed next to the standard register of the first person narrator, the account must be seen as coming from a consciousness other than his or, at best, from a consciousness he has inherited from his mother: "Aunt Florence was going good....She had a gold bracelet that she buy with the first real money she worked for. Just so the gold bracelet disappear...." (p. 47)

In addition to the broad-spectrum possession of both the first person narrator as well as the third person omniscient narrator by other characters and the first person narrator's talent as a ventriloquist, the human subjects of the various stories in *Salt* occasionally exercise the option to stroll into their story and take over the telling from the narrators: "He [Bango] wanted her [Pearl - the first person narrator's mother] to let my brother Michael be the African. And she had agreed. For the sake of peace, I agreed to let Michael be an African." (p.46) The "For the sake of peace, I agreed to let Michael be an African" is not a statement by the narrator as the absence of quotation marks would initially suggest, but the voice of the narrator's mother explaining her action, not in reported speech but as herself. Similarly, in chapter 8 (Miss Myrtle's Story), the third person omniscient narrator begins the story but three pages into the chapter, Miss Myrtle steps in and takes over the telling of her story. But this does not surprise the careful reader. The signal that Miss Myrtle has been itching to do just that is contained in the unascribed retort to Sparrow's "Yankees gone/ And Sparrow take over now..." earlier in the narration. Because the unascribed retort ("Take over what? Take over how? And everybody singing

it, everybody dancing to it..." (p.134) is not consistent with the temperament of the third person omniscient narrator, it signals the presence of the take-over/possession impulse.

With his obliteration of the distinction between third person and first person narrations, the use of mixed narrative patterns, and the possession of the narrators, Lovelace affirms a novel quest for a technique which, though risky, is versatile enough to articulate the complexities of the Caribbean psyche. Here then, to borrow artist LeRoy Clarke's self portrait, is the writer functioning as an obeahman, as a seerman, or, to appropriate Olive Senior's title, the writer working miracles, with language, with characters and with an ingenious narrative technique such that the more Lovelace reconstructs and interrogates the spirit of Africa in his work, the more native to himself and the more New Worldly he seems to become.

ENDNOTES

¹ Earl Lovelace, "From de I-lands," <http://www.geocities.com>.

² Ibid.

³ "Views of WI writer, Earl Lovelace," *Caribbean Contact*, June 1977, p.15.

⁴ See Cyprian Ekwensi, *Burning Grass: A Story of the Fulani of Northern Nigeria*. London: Heinemann, 1962.

⁵ ~~Fogard's article discusses the Aiyemina, and implicates Prosper A. Masquerade and Masquerade in "The~~
Trinidad and Tobago Review, 16(7-9): 7-10, September 1994.

⁶ ~~For a detailed view of~~ *Salt*, see Funso Aiyejina, "Salt: A Complex Tapestry" *Trinidad & Tobago*

⁷ Earl Lovelace, "The On-Going Value of Our Indigenous Traditions" in Selwyn Ryan (ed.),

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⁸ Ibid., p.341.

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