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Africanity in the Caribbean: "Linking Atlantic and Ancestor" in Edward Brathwaite's The Arrivals

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Abstract

Identity crisis is a significant issue the Afro-Caribbean peoples suffer from due to the legacy of colonialism. The former colonial powers used cultural hegemony to maintain their control over the Caribbean countries, cutting the Blacks' ties with their African heritage. The towering Barbadian poet, literary critic, and historian Edward Kamau Brathwaite (1930-2020) devoted his poetry to recovering, uncovering, and inventing Caribbean identity.Brathwaite attempts to find the Caribbean's cultural heritage and identity through his counter-hegemonic tools. In his poetry, Brathwaite aims to prove the presence of the African culture in the Caribbean to counter the hegemonic notion that Afro-Caribbeans are rootless. One way is to celebrate the Afro-Caribbean religions, rituals, and folklore, which link the Caribbean islands with Africa. This is best represented in Brathwaite's first trilogy, *The Arrivals*. The present paper examines the employment of Africanity in Brathwaite's trilogy through a Postcolonial lens, applying Antonio Gramsci's concept of "counter-hegemony."

Keywords: Hegemony, Counter-Hegemony, Rastafarianism, Voodoo, Law.

Introduction:

Counter-hegemony is a concept developed by Antonio Gramsci to describe how to subordinate people develop notions and discourse to challenge and oppose the beliefs imposed on them by the hegemon. According to Robert Cox and Albert Schilthuis, this concept can also be defined in terms of Globalization. Counter-hegemony refers to criticism and a "mobilization" against Globalization. It provides the intellectual base for the anti-globalization movement (923). Gramsci believes those who produce and disseminate hegemony in institutions like the church and schools are regarded as "traditional intellectuals."

On the other hand, the "organic intellectuals," who belong to the subordinate class, present counter-hegemony as a rebellious act (465-66). They establish "philosophically subversive" institutions that defy the power and authority of the dominant culture. Moreover, they take the responsibility of elevating the awareness of the persecuted

people whom Gramsci refers to as the "subaltern" (Boggs 212). Brathwaite's poetry sets a remarkable example of how intellectuals can disseminate counter-hegemony through their works.

The search for identity is a central thematic strand that runs through Kamau Brathwaite's trilogy. *The Arrivants* (1973) is a journey that he sets to forge a Caribbean identity and come to terms with the history of repression. It includes three of his most critically appreciated volumes: *Rights of Passage* (1967), *Masks* (1968), and *Islands* (1969).

Kamau Brathwaite devotes a significant part of *TheArrivants* to unearth and recuperate submerged African retentions in the Caribbean (Thieme 1). It is the only way he can counter the colonial hegemony that the Caribbean has no culture or heritage. Moreover, this method can provide the tools to forge the Caribbean identity.

Dr. Ameer Chasib Furaih, an instructor at the University of Baghdad, tackles a similar topic in his dissertation "Black Poetics, Black Politics: Poetry of the Civil Rights Movements in Australia and the United States, the 1960s-1980s". In one of the sections, he discusses the significance of the orality of poetry in reclaiming identity.

Africanity in the Caribbean

Several poems in *Islands* tackle the Caribbean reconstructions of three African archetypes: Ananse, Legba, and Ogun. The figures must undergo certain transformations to meet the current needs and circumstances. Ananse, also named Anancy and Anansi, which translates to "spider" in the Akan language, is defined in the Glossary appended to the trilogy as "the spider-hero of the Akans; earthly trickster, but once with powers of the creator-gods" (272); and Legba is described in the Glossary as:

The Dahomean/Haitian god of the gateway. He is the crucial link between man and the other gods and, as such, is often the first to be invoked at a ceremony. A celebrant possessed by Legba assumes an ancient, limping form and uses a crutch. The invocation to Legba marks an important moment in *vodoun* worship. (273)

Last but not least, Ogun is described as "Yoruba and Afro-Caribbean Creator God, seen here in his aspect of divine craftsman" (274). It is worth mentioning that these archetypes are all creator figures to different degrees. In some poems, Brathwaite presents a situation in which those archetypes undergo a metamorphosis in the Caribbean. Significantly, he compares Ananse to Legba in "Ananse," the second poem in the first sequence in Islands; "New World ."Though Legba is not mentioned directly in verse, a reference is made about limp, which asserts the presence of this god: "he stumps up the stairs [sic]" (10). What Brathwaite does in this poem is fusing the two characters to elevate Ananse to mythical dimensions and, thus, endeavoring "to rehabilitate the significance of the lowly creature . . . [to]

become an icon charged with transformative potential" (Warner-Lewis 59).

Ananse is a mythical spider who appears in a human form, and "Anansesem" is the name of the folklore he is associated with. In his poem, Brathwaite uses the African spelling for the title of this character to emphasize his African origins. According to Olive Senior's remark on the "Americanization" of the Anancy stories of the Ashante people of Ghana, the spiderman-trickster in the Caribbean "survives by 'working brains,' i.e., by cunning," and this wit is granted to him by Onyame; the Akan Supreme Divinity (5). She adds that Ananse stands for the characteristics of survival and the victory of the weak over the powerful. These qualities the enslaved Africans forcefully torn from their motherland must have found particularly relieving. In other words, Ananse symbolizes slave resistance and survival because he can turn the tables on his powerful persecutors using his wit and trickery, a kind of behavior adopted by the enslaved people to dominate within the limits of the plantation power structure (Rohlehr *Pathfinder*, 138). The folktale enabled the enslaved Africans to build a sense of continuity with their African origin and provided them with the means to preserve their identity behind the bars of slavery; therefore, it can be stated that Ananse played a multifunctional part in the enslaved people's lives. Ananse's association with the power of language and the effect of the word in challenging Eurocentrism is the primary concern of Brathwaite's poem. His significance lies in his role in surviving the cultural continuity, which is, according to Brathwaite, a sine qua non for ging Caribbean identity (Mordecai 23).

Senior states that the folktales have started to lose some of their traditional appeal as bedtime stories told to children to the "competing attractions" of the radio, television, and cinema ("A-Z of Jamaican Heritage" 6). In his poem "Ananse," Brathwaite portrays a similar situation, where Ananse's initial influence on the Caribbean imagination diminishes. In the poem's first lines, Ananse is described as a congealed, inactive presence gazing through the "glass" and "quartz ."Yet the potentiality latent in character is emphasized by the repetition of the word "thinking":

> with a black snake's un-
> winking eye
> thinking through glass
> through quartz
> quarries of cold water with a doll's liquid gaze, crystal. (1-6)

Mordecai argues that the "glass," "quartz," once "stony water," stand for the Atlantic water, hence history, which the Caribbean artists need to "quarry" to reclaim the lost heritage (41). Brathwaite compares Ananse to a doll to convey two different aspects. In one case, he is the West African Vodun religion fetish, defined as a human-made object with supernatural powers and is used (MacGaffey 25). In the guise of the focus, he can preserve ritual

power. In the other case, he is a play doll, which implies diminishing his status.

The poem begins with an ambiguous description of the spiderman-trickster. On the one hand, Brathwaite's Ananse is a storeroom of "memories trunked up in a dark attic," implying that his role as a hero in folktales and his embodiment of survival is forgotten (I. II. 9). On the other hand, his "green" brain is in a dormant. It is like "a green chrysalis / storing leaves" (7-8). Chrysalis is an insect's shape while developing; thus, it is a transformation state. The attic metaphor may convey a positive notion as well. The ancestral properties that evoke memories are stored in this cobwebbed place. Like the possessions in the attic, the conventional memory is always within reach and requires only minor work to be recalled and given a new shape, such as the one a chrysalis transforms into. In the popular imagination, Ananse's "reincarnation in the flesh of the living" at opportune moments is definite (Rohlehr, "The Dehumanization of History" 186). Thus, it can be argued that the poem's first lines suggest the possible emergence of Ananse from his cocoon, possessing a new spirit of creativity that defies the cultural hegemony of colonial and neo-colonial forces in the Caribbean society.

Ananse's stumping up the "stares" of the windows and the mention of his "fall from heaven" could be an allusion to Hephaestus, the lame god of craftsmen and fire in Greek mythology, who was expelled from Olympus, the home of Greek gods, by his mother Hera (Graves 51). The allusion emphasizes Ananse's role as a "creator" and elevates his position after being infantilized.

Ananse stores' memories relate to the African heritage the enslaved people brought to the Caribbean. These are the "ancient histories" of different tribes transported all together from Africa who have preserved their origin in language through aphorisms, riddles, and "conundrums" (I. II. 14). Ananse "spins" mysteries that include vestiges of the ancestors' ancient lifestyle, for instant, drumbeats to send messages from one village to another. Rohlehr highlights the significance of this part:

The word 'conundrums' does not only, through sound, foreshadow the drum theme in the following few lines but points to the association of the Ananse of the folk tales with word-play and riddles, as well as to the prevalence of punning in the Oral Tradition of the West Indies. (*Pathfinder* 186)

In the following lines, Ananse's "webs of sound" resonates "through the villages" via the drum, which stands for rhythm and rebellion (Rhohlehr,*Pathfinder* 166). Even in contemporary times, the drum is used in protest marches. Hence it can be stated that Brathwaite used the drum to connect African rituals with the modern Civil Rights Movement.

As Thieme suggests, despite Ananse's domestication as the seemingly tame hero of children's bedtime stories, he can free himself of the "dark attic" of the

Caribbean subconscious to once again function as a rallying point for cultural resistance (4). Therefore, in Braithwaite's view, Ananse transcends the part he plays as a hero of folktales, providing the prospect of alternative forms of Caribbean subjectivity by unearthing creolized African retentions in the Caribbean, in which oral and musical registers play a significant role.

Ananse functions as the ammunition of an alternative tradition that has influenced leaders of slave revolutions throughout the Caribbean history:

> Tacky heard him
> and L'Ouverture
> all the hung-
> ry dumb-bellied chieftains
> who spat
> their death into the ground:
> Grave, Port-au-Prince, Half Moon Fort. (21-27)

Tacky was the leader of a Jamaican slave rebellion in 1760-61, and Toussaint L'Ouverture (1744-1803) was the leader of the successful Haitian revolution from 1792- 1804 who expelled French and British colonizers, ended slavery, and established an independent colony in Haiti in 1797 (Thieme 4). These figures are the reincarnation of Ananse's features or, in other words, they are possessed by him since gods need to have people or things to practice their power. Brathwaite also mentions other "chieftains" who sacrificed their lives and the names of some places that hold mnemonic associations of other slave rebellions. The suggestion here might be that preserving and celebrating the African myths and folktales in the Caribbean can have the same effect as the slave revolutions. Like how Toussaint L'Ouverture, born into slavery, could free Haiti and defeat the European colonizers, the folktales acting like counter-hegemonic tools could free the Caribbean from the European cultural hegemony.

It can be argued that Brathwaite's reference to this leader is not haphazard, for he finds him a trickster like Ananse. Toussaint fought first with the Spanish against the French, and when France abolished slavery in 1794, he switched sides and fought with his army of formerly enslaved people for them against Spain and England. Though his constitution banned any influence from French authorities, he maintained superficial allegiance with Napoleon Bonaparte. Toussaint turned the European powers against one another while plotting to abolish slavery. His public speeches and political plans reveal familiarity with Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527). It is imperative to note that Toussaint's adopted surname, L'Ouverture, was given to him for his skill in exploiting "openings" in the defenses of his political and military opponents. (Sauna 7-8). The scheme used by figures such as Tacky and L'Ouverture was needed for overthrowing colonial slavery. This is compared to the spider's ability to spin webs that trap unwary victims.

The "poor" who benefit most from the rebellions are the keepers of these stories, and their descendants cannot

prevent this heritage: "Now the poor hang him up in the ceiling, / their brooms cannot reach his hushed corner" (34-35). Brathwaite depicts Ananse as a sort of William Blake's Miltonic Satan, a hero standing for political radicalism: "and he sits with the dust, desert's rainfall of soot, / plotting a new fall from heaven" (36-37). Hence Ananse is an archetype for the Afro-Caribbean aesthetic that Brathwaite endeavors to promote in his poetry. It can be argued that Brathwaite employs the Ananse myth as a counter-hegemonic tool to prove the continuity of African culture in the Caribbean. At the same time, he stresses the need to celebrate the Afro-Caribbean folktales to help achieve cultural wholeness. One of the reasons why Brathwaite chooses the figure of Ananse, in particular, might be because he is part of Afro-American folklore as well. Thus, reviving such folktales can cause a sense of oneness among the Black diaspora.

In the following lines, the rhythm changes, and Ananse's hidden "African" potential appears in rhetorically insistent shorter lines that demonstrate the way the figure is developing through the use of participles:

threading
threading
the moon
moonlight stories
his full mouth agape
a black pot
grinning
grinning. (38-45)

Ananse's relevance to Caribbean society lies in the revolutionary power of language. The nets he weaves in the quotation are linguistic; the "moonlight stories" are as reminiscent of ancestral heritage as the "silver skin webs of sound," which are a cry for radical actions.

In West African culture, the traditional storytellers and preservers of oral tradition, griots, often relate stories to a group of villagers gathered around a fire. The griot's narration is often thought to be inspired by gods and turns into the social act of performance. Ananse, the spinner of words, gathers the people together, assuming the griot's role. His are "wallaba wood words" depicting the Caribbean environment since the walloboa

tree is native to this area. That these words can ignite the inherent revolutionary spirit is portrayed through an evocation of fire which stands for inspiration: "fireflies, sparks, / crashing coals' waterfalls, / grey ashes aroused" (49-51). The images of fire here can be regarded as an extension of the allusion to Hephaestus. Hephaestus, like Ananse, is kind of a weaver; he ensnared his unfaithful wife, Aphrodite, with the god Ares in an unbreakable net of his devising. Another common feature between the Ananse and Hephaestus is their craftsmanship, with "words" in the former case and things in the latter (Graves 53).

It is significant to note that Brathwaite's representation of Ananse as an adult insurgent restores his role as an artist/creator character in the Akan folklore. As the poem progresses, Ananse's capacity

for causing positive change is represented as a counter-hegemonic "black" vision that puts an end to the repressive authoritarianism of the European worldview. His view, which may seem to share the apparent blindness of the "doll's liquid gaze" as mentioned early in the poem, creates possibilities for other perspectives on the Caribbean culture and identity:

black iron-eye'd eater; the many-eyed maker,
creator,
dry stony world-maker, word-breaker,
creator…. (62-65)

It can be argued that these lines affirm the need for a Creole view that can break through the hegemonic colonial discourse. This should not be merely an Afrocentric alternative but a view that advocates creative transformation. The word "creator" is highlighted by twice being allowed a line to itself. In this poem, Brathwaite challenges the Eurocentric aesthetic by presenting the character of Ananse and his world-breaking method at the end of the line that he uses throughout the trilogy. The examples in "Ananse" include: "un- / winking", "his- / tories", "drum- / beats", "man- / grove" (11-12, 13-14, 19-20, 28-29). This aspect leads to the suggestion that Brathwaite and Ananse share some features. Like Ananse, Brathwaite uses words to turn the tables on the more powerful colonizers. Furthermore, Brathwaite can be seen as a creator for his innovative style.

It can be stated that Ananse's features are summed up in these final lines of the poem. One is demonstrated in the radical leaders whose rebellions are responsible for the Caribbean as it exists now. Therefore, Ananse has been a "world-maker" and "creator" in the Caribbean. Because battles can be fought on the language field, Ananse is a model of the folk imagination, which contributes to providing the functional characteristics of a language. Hence he is also a "word-breaker" since the transformation happens to an imposed language through these characteristics. In the poem's concluding line, Brathwaite returns to the scenario of the griot who relates tales to the villagers gathered around a fire. The dog barking at the "stranger" interrupts the narrating of the story, just like how the arrival of colonizing "strangers" to Africa disrupts the African heritage to which Ananse originally belongs (Thieme 6). It can be argued that by presenting Ananse as a common house spider in the poor people's rooms and the character who influences the rebel leaders in Caribbean history, Brathwaite wants the Caribbean people to feel the presence of their heritage in their own homes and also realize its significance.

Brathwaite mentions Ananse in several poems in the trilogy for the same purpose: to prove the continuity of the African culture in the Caribbean. One instance is found in "Sunsum" when the Caribbean stranger returns to Africa searching for his roots and attempting to find his navel string, a symbol for race memory, which should have been buried according to African customs:

some-
where under gravel
that black chord of birth
still clings to the earth's
the warmth of glints, jewels' pressures, spin-
ning songs of the spider:
Kwaku Ananse, who gleams
in the darkness
and captures our underground fears. (22-30)

The title of the poem emphasizes the idea of continuity as "sun sum" is defined by Brathwaite as "spiritual blood" (*The Arrivants* 275). The clinging of the navel string to spider's songs is an act of reinforcing continuities. Ananse's restorative action lies in capturing the fears to substitute with certainty about the Caribbean culture and heritage (Mordecai 33).

Another example is "Eating the Dead," the fifth poem of the third sequence in *Islands*; "Rebellion ."In this poem, Brathwaite refers to the African-Haitian Vodou ritual of "manger lies morts" and the Catholic Eucharist. As Rohlehr elucidates in his book *Pathfinder: Black awakening in "The Arrivants" of Edward Kamau Brathwaite*, the Haitian ritual of "mange Les morts" is:

A ceremony of remembrance and in-gathering, which the Haitian people consider essential for the preservation of the psychic wholeness of the tribe. It thus parallels the Catholic Eucharist in which Christian ritualists eat the symbolic body (bread) and drink the symbolic blood (wine) of Christ to remember his death and resurrection and hope for their attainment of 'everlasting life. (258)

In both religions, the ritual embodies spiritual communion; however, the Akan tradition is practiced to show allegiance to one's tribe. The ceremony hence establishes both spiritual and political bonds. The "drinking of the gods" is a significant part of the rite whereby the oath-taker drinks from water poured over something sacred to an ancestral god (Voyce 155).

In the first section of the poem, the poet knocks thrice "on the black doors" to begin the ritual, then invokes Ananse to help in the ceremony:

Come in
Brother Spider
Creator of silver
I need your speed
and you're enduring cunning. (16-20)

Brathwaite chooses Ananse for his capacity to undermine the oppressor using his wit. Ananse is summoned here as a god, not a folktale figure. Thus, the word Spider is capitalized as "Ogun," Yoruba god of blacksmiths, who is invoked in the following lines: "It is the iron stranger / Ogun, cloud of gloom" (23-24). Possession in the Vodou ritual is described in the final lines of the poem:

But I
can show
you what it means to eat

your god, drink his explosions of power

, and grow from the slow sinking mud of your booty. (69-73)

Possession means allowing the loa, intermediaries between humans and Bondyé, the supreme god in Voudo (Ramsey 7). The "swallowing" of the loa in these lines is presented as a way of countering the diminishment of African culture in the Caribbean that is caused by colonization.

The second poem about an Afro-Caribbean transformed archetype is "Legba," the fifth poem in the first sequence in *Islands*; "New World ."The poem refashions Legba to reveal his hidden potential. The nature of the transformation that Legba undergoes in the Caribbean can be located by drawing a comparison between him and his Dahomean predecessor:

The Haitians do not know him as the beautiful young man of Dahomey, the patron of sexual urges. They say that he is an old peasant who has worked the fields hard all his life and is now at the end of his powers. When he possesses a person, the limbs are crippled and twisted and terrible to see. (Rohlehr *Pathfinder*, 194)

This view is emphasized by Haitian iconography. Legba's wood carvings show him with a hunchback or holding a crutch, indicating the diminution of African-derived cultural forms due to colonization and slavery. The status of Legba, therefore, is liable to be allegorized as an embodiment of the psychological legacy caused by the confinement in the Atlantic slave ships and the back-breaking plantation labor. It can be inferred that Ananse's transformation from a creator trickster into the mischievous folk figure of Caribbean children's bedtime stories, who appears to be more of a joker, parallels Legba's transformation from a virile young deity into a wearied aged cripple. It can be argued that Brathwaite attempts to make his fellow Caribbean people realize the sublimity of their Afro-Caribbean folk figures and Gods, which can help overcome the inferiority complex engendered by the colonial past.

In the poem's opening lines, Brathwaite presents the Haitian version of Legba as a veteran of the Far East campaigns of the Second World War. Although he earns "ribbons" and a small pension for this military service, he does not gain enough respect in the Caribbean:

Today god came to church
He had fought in the last war
and has ribbons to show for
it; knows Burma and Malaya and has been
to Singapore; gets a small pension
but apart from that
not very much attention. (1-8)

His descendants also suffer terrible conditions and poverty in the Caribbean: "His children eat dirt" (9). The only way for the young generation out of this poverty inferno for those people is too complicit with neo-colonial capitalism and become

cripples of another kind: "Those that are brown / enough, hobble / into a maimed

world of banks, books, insurance businesses." (25-27). Just like colonization makes Legba cripple, the descendants will also develop a disability if they submit to this sort of hegemony.

After portraying the feeble and disfigured side of Haitian Legba in the first section of the poem, Brathwaite proposes in the second section an alternative version of the deity, which restores his role as a God of new beginnings, a loa who provides access to a more stable sense of self-built upon an awareness of "black" identity, which Rohlehr identifies with the "'dread' beat of rock steady and reggae"; Jamaican music genres (*Pathfinder* 198). Hence the rhythm changes in the section accordingly, as monosyllabic rhetorical intonation presents an inflection that indeed mimics African discourse and is primarily related to the significant symbol of *The Arrivants*, the drum, and expressive of the Afro-Caribbean identity: "And black black black / the blackbird's clack / in the shak shak tree" (31-33).

Legba is also mentioned in "Negus," the sixth poem of the third sequence in *Islands*; "Rebellion ."In this poem, the speaker invokes Legba using the exact words people say at the beginning of a vodoun rite: "Attibon Legba, open the gate for me" (Mackey 153). It is Brathwaite's invocation to be allowed to unearth the African base of the Caribbean folklore:

Att
Pettibon
Pettibon Legba
Pettibon Legba
Ouvri bayi pour Moi
Ouvri bayi pour Moi…. (83-89)

The language of these lines is Haitian Creole which is French-based. Legba is addressed as Papa Legba in Haiti while addressed as Legba Atibon in West Africa (Lopez 79). Calling him Attibon Legba indicates that Brathwaite endeavors to restore Legba's past position in Africa. Using Creole, Brathwaite not only manipulates a European language but also employs it to call upon Legba.

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