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When the Gods Are Invoked:
The *Egungun* and Carnival Masks in African and Caribbean Drama

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Research Paper :

Introduction :

In most of black Africa and the Caribbean the spectacle of the masquerades, be they carnival masks, entertainment masks, cult masks or sacred masks is very recurrent. From Carnival masks in the Caribbean and parts of southern Africa, the *egungun* masks and the *ugunugu*, *bundu* or *gongoli* masks of most of West Africa (Jonathan Peters, 1978) and other sacrosanct masks in other parts of Africa (including imitation masks put out by youths), the mask covers a broad spectrum of life experiences. This study

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however does not focus on all kinds of masks that may be found in Africa or the Caribbean but on culturally significant masks. Carl Jung's analysis of literary archetypes quite recognizes the fact that each society has a specific world view that is built in the collective unconscious. This trait, according to him, is common to all humanity upon the foundation of which each society builds its own experience of life coloring it with its unique culture, custom and traditions. From this perspective, the mask in the African and Caribbean communities does not refer simply to the cold, carved artifact which the sculptor etches or casts in wood, bronze or any other material but more so to the dynamic interplay of the carved artifact and its maker in a dance of celebration. Sometimes the mask modulates from the carved object or statue contemplated in isolation through the image of a cover or shield to the living tissue of a man or woman who becomes a model of creation (Jonathan Peters, 1978).

Carnival (like the *Egungun*) is an annual celebration of life found in many parts of the world. It perhaps started in Europe before spreading to other parts of the world including the Caribbean. In this part of the world which comprises many people of African descent, the carnival has been influenced by ancient African traditions of putting together natural objects to create a piece of sculpture, a mask or a costume to represent a certain idea or spiritual force. In essence, the African mask (or the *egungun*) and the carnival mask represent a complex involvement in the continual dance of life, death and rebirth. Because the African and the Caribbean masks are a composite quintessence of artistic beauty and spiritual exuberance, they also become a medium through which the gods meddle in human or communal proceedings through the dance of possession. This complex and ambiguous taxonomy of the African and the Caribbean mask informs some of Soyinka and Walcott's plays such as *The Road* and *Dream on Monkey Mountain*.

The Egungun and Carnival Masks: Aesthetics and Social Function

The *Egungun* as used by Soyinka in *Road* just as the carnival mask used by Walcott in *Dream* does not refer to all types of masquerades or masked figures. According to Carol Ann Lorenz (2006), the word *egungun* refers to

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masking associated with gods, spirits and ancestors. Specific masks represent specific gods but as for the ancestors while each mask has a personal name, it does not usually refer to a specific ancestor. Rather *egungun* masks embody the collective force of gods and the ancestors (11). The mask in the African community is made of wood, bronze and dark or colourful cloth. The masked figure whirls the costume in circles so that the bits of cloth decorated with cowries, ribbons, mirrors and metal fly through the air. Sometimes the costume touches members of the audience like arms. In fact the strips can be seen as abstract arms that represent gods and spirit of important members of the community who are now ancestors. The masks may have many layers of brightly coloured fabric. The accumulation of stuff on this mask is to represent the strength of the god or the riches of the ancestor.

In most African communities, masquerades usually appear annually during a joyful festival ether in honour of the gods or to celebrate the distinguished dead. During such festivals, the gods and ancestors bless the living, promote physical and spiritual health, settle disputes, enforce tradition and morality, and cleanse the community of witchcraft. The people believe that their gods and especially the ancestors have the responsibility to compel them to uphold the ethical standards of the past generations of their clan. The masquerades spiritually clean the community through their dramatic acting and miming demonstrating both ethical and moral behaviour more befitting of their descendants. These annual ceremonies among other things also serve as means of assuring the ancestors a place among the living. It also indicates that the present generations of the living do not stand entirely alone, nor is the individual ever abandoned entirely to the limits of his own powers, for the dead ancestors continue to watch over and guide their descendants. Basically, it is an attempt to reassure people about an individual's immortality and diminish the fear of death through the dramatic appearance of the dead among the living during the dance of the possession.

The role of the mask in the African community is not only to create a link between existences. There are masks in addition to cult or sacred masks that perform different functions; for example, the *Ghejero* mask (Margaret

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Laurence, 1968) referred to as hanger of witches - a grotesque mask whose wearer used to be responsible for executing people found guilty of witchcraft. This shows the role of the African mask as police of the community. In Wole Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* too, we learn that Igwesu keeps a mask in the village as a concrete symbol of his attachment to tradition unlike his twin brother who has completely severed ties with tradition. Here the mask becomes a symbol of one's cultural attachment to his community.

As earlier stated, Walcott's use of the mask motif in *Dream* is similar to Soyinka's in *Road*. According to Paul Breslin (2001), in *Dream* there are several parallels with the Trinidadian carnival as "Monkey See, Monkey Do" (239) is a stock carnival character, and both Moustique and Lestrade assume that the Apparition's mask, left behind with Makak is for carnival use (323). Carta Marcia Verdino-Sullword (1990) explains that there are three major festivals in the Caribbean - Jonkonnu, Hosay and Carnival; the biggest of the three being carnival in which masking by participants is a prominent characteristic.

The mixture of Indian, African, English, French and Spanish cultures which blended over five centuries created a unique set of artistic traditions in the Caribbean. These diverse ethnic and cultural heritages are reflected in a series of jubilant festivals including carnival which give voice to the political, social and religious life of the Caribbean. Throughout its history the Caribbean carnival has served as expression of the popular will. During the colonial era it helped articulate the desire for independence and when that goal was achieved it consolidated a sense of regional unity, asserted the African and Indian presence as a focal point of the Caribbean ethos and preserved the heritage and cultural identity both at home and in the new lands to which the emigrants had journeyed. Besides fulfilling socio-political functions, the Caribbean carnival continues to have a religious significance as well. The ritual use of masks permits the performers to enter a spiritual realm of reality and to lead the participants through myth-making, satire and bacchanalian release to a higher level of understanding and truth (Verdino-Sullword, 1990).

The Caribbean carnival with masking at the centre of activities was born of a combination of Carib and Arawak Indian traditions and was later influenced

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by the European immigrants who flocked to the region following Columbus' discovery as well as by the African slaves whom colonials uprooted and brought with them to settle in the plantations. The ethnic mix was further enriched in the 19th century by the importation of indentured labourers from India and the Orient. Over the centuries by the process of "creolization" the different heritages have intertwined to form a distinctly new art form which has found expression in carnival characterised by elaborate masks, costumes, floats, song, dance and chants. The tradition of carnival and masking is handed down from generation to generation and players often learn their roles by apprenticing from other players; yet, this is not formal theatre. Rather, it is a populist performance with players drawn from the community and with fables and myths refashioned each year to reflect changing societal concerns.

Carnival masks and costumes generally illustrate the African aesthetic of assemblage, the principle of combining each and every bit of difference - contradictory elements combined in a single work. Thus, boldly contrasting colours, textures and materials create a riot of sensory experience and frequently serve as metaphors that draw on ancient images which express contemporary concerns. Masks in the Caribbean also exhibit European inspired images of colonial conquest and the vitality of the elementary Caribbean presence which survived waves of European invasion as well as the traditions of other immigrants. The carnival that may take several days serves as a pulsating channel of communication between old world heritage, new world customs and the spiritual realm. If the mask is venerated in the African and Caribbean communities it is more so because of the spiritual vitality of this artefact once certain conditions are fulfilled.

The Spiritual Vitality of the *Egungun* and Carnival Masks

In order to demonstrate the spiritual vitality of the mask in their communities Soyinka and Walcott present the major characters in the plays under study with a burden each - a burden that engages life and serenity in their communities. Professor in *Road* undertakes to uncover the secret of death so as to bring immortality to the Yoruba and humanity as a whole while Makak in

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Dream sets out to delineate the real Caribbean identity and illuminate the corridor of rootedness and belonging. However, the weight of the missions entrusted on the protagonists by the playwrights is above their capacities and so requires the intervention of supernatural forces or the gods for any eventual success.

In the African and Caribbean communities, masks are tangible means of connection with the world of the gods as earlier stated. These artefacts are regarded with reverence and at the same time provide a near - touching of the revered object - god become flesh - for in the act of possession of the dancer by the spirit of the mask, dancer and mask merge in a union of the mortal and the immortal. The mask by itself, when not being won by its true wearer, is simply 'the mask', a thing, a carved object. When the only man who can rightfully wear it puts it on, then possession takes place. During ceremonies that are regularly performed in honour of the gods, the masked dancer representing the god or spirit becomes possessed. In other words, the dancer becomes the god-apparent: half god, half man. This is what Soyinka describes as the *agemo* phase in *Road*:

> The dance is the movement of transition; it is used in the play as visual suspension of death in much the same way as Murano, the mute, is a dramatic embodiment of this suspension. He functions as an arrest of time or death, … Agemo, the mere phase, includes the passage of transition from human to divine essence (as in the festival of Ogun in play). (vi)

The focal character in *Road* is an absurdly enigmatic professor who is on a symbolic quest for the Word which he describes in various occasions as "companion not to life, but death"(159); "a golden nugget on the tongue" (180); "a terrible fire" (192); "that elusive kernel…the key, the moment of our rehabilitation" (202) and "the scheme" (204). From these conflicting metaphorical definitions, Bernth Lindfors (1976) concludes that the Word is some form of cabalistic wisdom which is precious, powerful and associated with death and redemption (203). If Lindfors' definition is anything to go by, Professor's search may be viewed as a quest for the meaning of existence; or

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since it is a quest for the essence of death it may be considered an attempt to seek immortality through the conquest of death itself. Professor believes that the key to immortality lies in the mystery of death, which seems to be a sole monopoly of the gods. Professor wants mankind to have this privilege as well.

Just before the play opens, Murano in a state of possession has been struck and knocked down by the lorry-driver Kotonu at the moment when he was masquerading as the god *Ogun* during the annual Drivers' Festival. Kotonu and his mate Samson hide the body in the back of their lorry (to deceive the angry worshippers) and bring to town. This is how Professor finds Murano and keeps him as his companion in order that he may learn from him the ultimate secrets of physical dissolution and the return to primal energy which underlies all existence.

Professor keeps Murano with the hope of discovering the secret of transition if and when the mute's tongue is loosened. Professor keeps Murano because he is a man knocked down at the moment of his possession by the god Ogun when he had literally become the god-apparent. Being neither completely dead nor minimally alive, Murano has already acquired the ontological knowledge Professor desires but cannot pass it onto anyone in the world of the living. When the wait becomes interminable, Professor tries to stage "a masked performance to bring about a possession without the proper ritual, the right time, the sanctioned means and the priest's supervision" (48). This indirectly leads to Professor's death to confirm Margaret Laurence's warning that:

> The state of possession can take place only with the proper ritual, at the time of the festival, and with the accompaniment of the drums which speak the key phrases and establish the pattern and place of the entire procedure. The mask has to be treated in the proper ritualistic manner so that it will be kindly disposed towards the human community. It is always forbidden for anyone except the chief priest to know who dances under any particular mask. It is considered dangerous to go near an *egungun*. It is unthinkable to stage a masked performance

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and to bring about a possession without the proper ritual, the right time, the sanctioned means and the priest supervision (21-48).

Professor's course appears to be a noble one in which he exploits all the resources within his reach to find an answer to a metaphysical question that puzzles humanity as a whole. He finally does not get an answer to his quest perhaps because of what Margaret Laurence calls "hubris"- the self-pride of a man compelled to know what only the gods may know, to be in fact a god (63). If professor's noble quest cannot be answered in African and even orthodox religion then one is forced to conclude that the value of human life is fully contained within life itself and there are no profound secrets to be found in death. Professor has found the incommunicable essence of death for himself in death and so everyone must similarly find it for himself.

If Professor does not get satisfaction at the end of his own quest, Makak can be said to have partially found an answer to his own riddle. On page 305, Makak exclaims, "O God, O gods, why did you give me this burden?" and Paul Breslin explains that if anything holds through all the dizzying metamorphoses of Makak's vision, it is his role as an agent of transformation, in whom old identities are broken up to make room for the new, as yet still forming and that this is the burden the gods have given him (351). Makak therefore has the daunting task of defining true Caribbean identity and identity is complexly determined and very difficult to sort out. That is why Makak, like Professor in *Road*, must delve into the invisible world through the agency of the mask to find an answer to a disturbing question – the dividing line between the white colonial world and the black world created in resistance to colonialism.

Dream is a very complex play. As Paul Breslin interrogates, is it a political critique, given its historical association with cultural defiance of colonial repression, its Bakhtinian inversions of hierarchy? Or a religious ritual, recognized in the church calendar, the farewell to the flesh that its name denotes? (142). The ironies that mutually cancel possibilities of interpretation in this play crowd into our awareness, jostling for attention like the dancers in a carnival. We must therefore see the play as a dream-like eruption of

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conflicting emotions that have to be sorted out by a slow process of untangling, recovery and loss and the illogic will trouble us less. In "A Note on Production" Walcott warns that this play, like other dreams, is illogical, derivative and contradictory (208). Osy Okagbue also explains that:

> *Dream* avoids in its plot a linear contiguity of events, and opts instead for a cyclic progression of action. This to a large extent is similar to African traditional theatre in that the basic architectonic patterns the key metaphor of the mask allows a freedom of coexistence and association between diverse dramatic moments. Meaning in this theatre comes as an experience of totality (8).

The above views indicate that *Dream* calls for several modes of interpretation. One of the possible interpretations is that the structure of the play is that of Trinidad carnival with all the characters as members of the carnival procession each in a particular costume. Makak in the play is always presented as either holding a mask or is close to a mask. This is exactly what happens during the Trinidad carnival where masking is part of the festivities. If we consider the play as a carnival procession then Makak becomes possessed at one point by the spirit of his mask; what some characters in the play erroneously consider as madness. As Margaret Laurence explains:

> When possession takes place the god or spirit of the mask is believed to be actually and perceptibly present. The dancer's own spirit is suspended, held in abeyance. In other words, his own spirit has momentarily departed or is held in some hiatus and the god or spirit has taken over and when the mask-wearer becomes subservient to the spirit of the mask he is often able to perform with a skill greater than his. (42)

From Laurence's explication above, what critics have termed Makak's psychosis is actually a state of possession that brings Makak in communion with the gods and to do the assignment the gods have given him. The action in the play takes place within two separate planes - in the physical world and in Makak's mind during the dance of possession. Makak enters into this state which rules the play until its epilogue like the moment in a Vedoum ceremony

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when Legba opens the gate and the gods take possession of the worshippers. Only Makak and the audience are aware of what transpires during this trance-like state; the other characters are cut off from this privilege.

Makak's possession or what he calls the Apparition is also the inspirer of his eloquence in the play. In the list of characters for *Dream* Walcott identifies it as "the moon, the muse, the White Goddess, a dancer". Makak himself refers to the "Apparition" as "God who once speak to me in the form of a woman on Monkey Mountain" (226). He also says "I feel I was God self, walking through cloud/ In heaven on my mind" (231). These confirm Makak's transformation and presence in the invisible world of gods and spirits. After Makak's possession Tigre quickly offers his diagnosis, "the old man mad" and Lestrade offers an etiology: "is this rage for whiteness that does drive niggers mad" (228). As scene one opens Makak remains on the ground, the mask near him. He has not moved since the end of the prologue, but we have gone back to the morning of the day that ended with his arrest. Moustique who does not quite understand the transformation that Makak has undergone notices that there is "No fever, no sweat" (231-32), as if to say that his illness is not somatic but mental. When Makak tells him bluntly "I am going mad" (232), Moustique's reply establishes the contrast between the two: "Go mad tomorrow, today is market day" (232). If Makak is the god-apparent, Moustique is an ordinary human and that is why their temperaments are contrasting. Makak too can cure the sick because he has acquired the healing powers of the gods. Moustique even with Makak's mask cannot succeed because he has not been possessed by the spirit of the mask.

In spite of Makak's eloquence and seemingly elevated status, Lestrade informs his hearers "as you can see, this [Makak] is a being without a mind, a will, a name, a tribe of its own," and the dehumanizing list of negations culminates in the neuter pronoun "its" so that like most racist rhetoric, his speech asserts that the inferiority of the other is self-evident "as you can see" (307). The above statements by Lestrade bring to light the identity question that is a current in Caribbean literature. Unlike Lestrade who assumes an

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identity that is not his, Makak before recounting his dream describes himself with an abjection strangely dignified by its casual frankness:

> Sirs, I am sixty years old. I have lived all my life
> Like a wild beast in hiding. Without child, without wife.
> People forget me like the mist on Monkey Mountain.
> Is thirty years now I have look in no mirror,
> Not a pool of cold water, when I must drink,
> I stir my hands first, to break up my image. (226)

Paul Breslin earlier cited, argues that Makak is a sort of anti-Narcissus, so repulsed by his own appearance that he has avoided all mirrors, taking pains to "break up" his reflection in the water before drinking (138). This is not only a metaphor of self-hatred, but also a refusal of self-recognition or definition. Makak compares himself to the amorphous "mist," and it is the image of mist that begins the account of his dream. The picture we have of Makak is true of other characters like Moustique, Tigre or Souris. Their animal names are a clear signal of their questionable identity and as Moustique accepts to accompany Makak back to Africa we reflect on his melancholic utterance: "A man not a man without misery" (242). The people in the play too are described as "trees under pressure, / twisted forest, / trees without names, / a forest with no roots" (248). Makak also refers to them as "living coals" (249). Coal is a metaphor for racial blackness; it is also the cheapest and most humble commodity in the marketplace – charcoal burning is the work of those who can get nothing better, the trade of the last resort. During the healing scene Makak blames the people for lack of faith and self-hatred: "Let us go on, *compere*. These niggers too tired to believe anything again" (250). His words recall his own answer, in the prologue, to Corporal Lestrade's question, "What is your race?": "I am tired." And if the others are "trees without names," Makak too has forgotten his own name under the false identities of monkey and lion.

Makak, the central character embarks on the task Walcott sets for the West Indian actor: "[e]very actor should make this journey to articulate his origins,

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but for those who have been called not men but mimics, the darkness must be total" (5). Makak resolves that "if the moon go out…I will still find my way; the blackness will swallow me. I will never wear it like a fish wears water" (286). Even if the moon, source of Makak's vision fails him, he will continue till he reaches Africa. When Souris asks him by what means they would get to Africa, Makak replies, "Once, when Moustique asked me that, I didn't know." But Makak now realises that the journey must take place but in the mind, which "can bring the dead to life, it can go back, back, back, deep into time. It can make a man a king; it can make him a beast" (291).

Makak's journey to Africa is therefore psychological as opposed to Marcus Garvey's. Garvey was a black militant organiser and philosopher, and now a national hero of Jamaica, best known for his "Back to Africa" movement of the 1920s and 1950s. According to oral tradition, his words were "look to Africa, where a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is near" (Introduction to Roger Mais' *Brother Man* by E.K. Brathwait, x). Garvey's back to Africa journey was physical and not psychological for according to him, the only place where blacks in the Diaspora could prosper was in Africa and nowhere else. And a good number of Africans in the Americas did return to Africa. On his part, Makak is aware that the unfolding action around him represents his own consciousness rather than literal events.

The striking off of the Apparition's head during Makak's dream marks the end of the possession as he exclaims: Now, O God I am free" (320) and for the first time Makak remembers his real name – neither the derisive "Makak" nor the secret name given by the Apparition, but simply "Felix Hobain." Makak's closing speech claims a new rootedness after his travails, "washed from shore to shore, as a tree in the ocean":

> The branches of my fingers, the roots of my feet, could grip nothing, but now, God, they have found ground. Let me be swallowed up in mist again, and let me be forgotten, so that when the mist open, men can look up, at some small clearing with a hut, with a small signal of smoke, and say, "Makak" lives there. Makak lives where he has always lived, in the dream of his people." (326)

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The claims of prophesy and kingship that dominated Makak's dream during the state of possession have given way to a claim of modest stability: instead of "palaces," a small clearing with a hut, a small signal of smoke; instead of a new order of blood and revolution, the persistence of the rooted man in the place where he has always lived. Makak had feared that his "kingliness" might have "created the "shadows" (304) of his subjects, but now the causality is reversed: it is the collective imagination of the people that created the myth of Makak, their communal memory that will preserve it. When the state of possession is over, Lestrade urges Makak to "go home". For Makak, going home means going "back to the beginning, to the green beginning of his world" (326). He is going out into the same world that he left behind; it is no less colonized, racially hierarchical, and poorer than it was. What has changed is his sense of his place in that world. He still lives within the colonized world, but he no longer has internalized colonial discourse. His new found dignity is "small" but firmly grounded, and it is enough to immunize him to the insults that world will doubtlessly continue to offer. By going back to the beginning, the green beginning of his world, Makak becomes a solitary avatar of Walcott's Caribbean Adam.

Conclusion

Soyinka and Walcott in the plays studied celebrate the African and Caribbean mask as something that is both artistic and functional. As an object it has only its relatively insignificant quota of vital energy that is found, according to African or Caribbean ontology, in all matter and substance of the visible world, vegetable and mineral. But the African and Caribbean masks have a force that extends to the world of the ancestors, spirits and gods particularly during the dance of possession. It is this interconnectedness of the different areas of existence that provides spiritual forces a place among the living. Professor in *Road* engages on a rather precarious and delicate task that causes his death thus setting the limit to human metaphysical aspirations while Makak in *Dream* obtains an acceptable answer to his quest through the medium of the mask in the dance of possession. Because of the ability of gods to interfere in human proceedings

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through the agency of the mask, moral discipline, serenity and individual responsibility to the community are enforced as seen in the two plays studied.

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