

BLACK ARTS QUARTERLY

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Making the Spirit of 20th and 21st Century Culture

WE PLAY **EVIL** GAMES

(a vision of the future prison-industrial-entertainment complex)

(c) the UJIMA Collective 1999

By : *David Greason*

Today, I die. I always knew that I'd accept it when Death came for me, but I didn't expect how resigned I'd feel. After all, I'm only 36 ... Nope. I sit here ready for my sojourn. Not eager, not dreadful - just ready.

As the clanking iron cage I've called 'home' for the last two days swings open, I start to reminisce on the life I live. Childhood, too quick — cast aside with impetuous naiveté. Collegiate accolades swole my ego triple-sized, and I entered the stock trades prepared to dominate ... at age 22.

Even from this dank, underground, stone corridor, I can feel the reverbs of the thundering crowd in the arena above. The only sound louder is the sloshing trickle of sewage drip leaking around the stones and running along the floor. It's cool on my bare feet. A last pleasure for the condemned, perhaps?

The light from the end of the passage burns my eyes as I ascend into the uproar. I believe I can hear all 2.7 billion viewers worldwide scream from their Transpara-chair water sofas. My first trade. TSC, the first water furniture company went public in October 2024. Started at \$8 per share; that's where I got my clients in. By 2034, they were at \$120. I wonder how many of the folks I made wealthy would be watching me buy it for the last time tonight...

It's been four long years in this facility. Assault with intent to disrespect supervisory authority. I was among the first 10,000 to receive automatic life sentences under the anti-class warfare legislation. Who knew you weren't supposed to question an executive vice-president's investment strategies? When he called me 'mulinya' at the end of his tirade, I just lost it. Grabbed him by his jacket lapels and started to shake him. How much money had I made for him and his? Didn't matter anymore. I had the audacity to raise up in a management meeting. Security tore through me like a finish line ribbon. I had thought I was lucky they didn't pitch me off the 40th floor. It reminded me of Dad's favorite Kool G Rap song. I didn't know that toss would have done me a favor.

"Up, up, up and away / cuz I don't play, clown / buck, buck, buck / take that with you on the way down / I'm hopin' you got springs or wings on those shoes / cuz you lose / when I got the ill street blues." I dragged myself up the long staircase onto the arena floor. I took the

baton-spear from the shelf at the left of the doorway and stepped into the light. The two guards outside the door stepped into the stairs, and the metal door slammed shut and bolted behind me.

The crowd booed and threw garbage down at me. I was the challenger. I never paid much attention to Death Row matches. It was hard enough trying to keep my mind on the basketball I'd been playing for so long.

It used to be so simple when I was a kid. The NBA, NFL, MLB and the rest gave the major opportunities for wealth to dark-skinned people like me. Then, somebody at Disney had a wild idea for late night entertainment.



It was supposed to be a one-shot deal. Oakland Raiders vs. San Quentin Penal Lords in an exhibition of American football. 2030 — late night airtime on ESPN ... lumberjack competitions couldn't cut it anymore. I watched the game, along with 2 million other people. And the Lords won.

It seems so many quality athletes were warehoused in prisons over the first twenty years of the 21st century that even a professional team couldn't compete. With the huge ratings, there was a new market to be capitalized. Even I invested in the various Penal Leagues.

No more huge player and coach contracts. Minimum funds for front-office management and privatized ownership of the prisoners' labors. Professional leagues didn't have a chance. Soon, the arenas and sporting

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THE SHADOWED DAWN

By: Dennis Tyler

When I ran away from slavery, it was for myself; when I advocated emancipation, it was for my people; but when I stood up for the rights of women, self was out of the question, and I found a little nobility in the act.

—baldwin

#1

*I am the black beast caged in white Amerikkka
and no one wants me.*

Blue in the face, sauntering down the unfamiliar streets of my home, my ghetto, forever traveling with two pairs of eyes: one in the front to be mindful of my future (what future?), one in the back to be haunted by my past.

Washed by fire hoses, massaged by nightsticks, my body bore the burden of brutality once again

Walking with the wind upon my neck . . . fearing the noose

*Faces of children crushed into the wire fences arms stretched behind their backs
with no joy in their bewildered eyes on display for the world / the camera never stops . . . no, the camera never stops*

*Grazing the marshland drowning in the quicksand kicking up the dirt despising the
Moloch who breathes atop the crown of my head searing my scalp
— boiling my blood*

*Flesh eaten—dogs bite—clothes ripped—dogs bite—loose limbs—dogs bite—smashed jawbone—pigs bite. This ain't no fuckin' tokenism!
Don't outlaw the segregation of the my school, outlaw the segregation of your mind.*

I, teetering on the edge of madness, must be lifted from the trenches of Birmingham

only to return after its rebirth: never

I, verging on reactionary suicide, must cross Meridian Hill to get to the mountaintop

where the wisps of fresh air can brush my face and faith can be restored

I, blinded by the cultural genocide, shout the Dream, recite the Dream, preach the

Dream, dream the Dream, but do I believe it?

I, functioning under the ideas of Black Nationalism, must take care of mine own.

I quarter, 2 dimes, a nickel and ten cents won't buy you a cheeseburger, won't pay the

rent. I don't want to buy your food, I want to buy your acceptance — fool

That's wishful thinking gone wrong

My people? my race? my country Balkanized, divide and conquer is the rule of the game,

Where are the other alternatives? Who is going to defend me? Why am I being

pigeonholed? What is at stake? How will I achieve freedom?

Where are the other alternatives, who is going to defend me, why am I being pigeonholed, what is at stake, how will I achieve freedom . . .

where are,

who is,

why am,

what is,

how will.

What!Where.How?Why: WHO AM I????

(The repetition is killing me softly.)

Gimme a M, Gimme a I, Gimme an A, Gimme a S, Gimme a C, Gimme a L, Gimme a C, Gimme a S, Gimme a N, Gimme a C, Gimme a C, Gimme a Beat, Gimmie a

C-H-O-I-C-E, choice

Excluded from the Singleman Party with tea time and wine and caviar and chandeliers,

Included in the strip club with dimly, neon red lighting and shaded nipples and polluted air regurgitated as smoke.

Watch out Benny, the Boogieman Carl is gonna get ya'

Gazing at the fiery tomb of Malcolm, and the cradled grave of Martin, remembering the

when's and whys and what ifs, shaking off the branch of courage, picking up the leaves of despair, sailing the sea of hope, contemplating a Revolution.

Poisoned in the summer of sixeight, not by the sweat, but by the tears of monumental

usurpations of R!a!g!e!

Berkeley without Bancroft, Strip(ped) from the hut of political activism, snatched from the

grasp of Left hands

No more dillydallying, no more pussyfooting, black power is in the bullet, gun = freedom, or is it, freedom = gun?

Conner beware,

I said Conner beware.

Fooled by ideas of participatory democracy and beloved community, yet I have no

participation in the nation, and definitely no damn love

Agape meet my heart, clear my mind, redeem my soul, I been locked down for 77 months

and I need to be unlocked so that I may not forever be . . .

unloved.

#2

I am the counterculture, the hippie, and the bourgeoisie in america

I hope to understand you and I hope that you hope to understand me

From hallucinatory dreams bottled in pills,

I remember the bright rays of the sun glistening my blond hair, soothing my outer being

— then there was the tingling sensation. (Purely orgasmic!) smiling faces of the huddled masses surround me.

I remember peach colored cheeks, the smell of rosemary piercing the air, gleaming blue

and green eyes, warm skin, and nakedness

I remember patches and swirls of psychedelic orange and pastoral blues and peacock

greens all embroidered (or should I say smeared) on the bus: on the road to an unforeseen journey, on the road, on the road . . .

I remember cups of grass and saucers of speed (dinnertime) like Clockwork, Orange

juice on the side to quell the parched throat. AH! I remember climbing the mountain, the continual climb, the continual remounting, the illumination, the illumination. Herbert HELP! Is this the happy consciousness or am I held by the claw of repressive desublimation. (if so, I think I like it — for now!)

I remember many, many hugs coupled with many, many kisses, creating lots and lots of

sex.

My generation, like no other, had good times and good fun.

We, who, sanctioned the laws and visions of our democratic society.

Who stormed through the drought of gloom and early mourn with a breath of

rejuvenation at a time when ideologies emerged and failed, attempts at heroism were made and abandoned, but the belief in the beliefs remained paramount.

Who forged forth as the Original Sixteen leading Stern to a new awareness

Who danced from dawn till dusk on the bare dirt and patchy grass of Altamont rolling

with the Stones' Under My Thumb, hearing the cries of the Devil.

Who gathered at the be-ins of Golden Gate Park with hair straddled on their waists

(yes, everyone had hair to the waist, except, of course, Allard)

being "human" and "real", conspicuously at odds with the social norms,

Who lived communally smoking dope on the streets sweeping down the mightiest walls of oppression standing up for an ideal

Who moved to the drum of their own beat, the rhythm of their own soul.

Who blazed into Mississippi with pickets in their left hands and the SDS flag in

their right,

(continued next page)

Twice Murdered

By: *Kamilah Moonpoet*

At times like this my pen is useless
And I feel like a coward on a fruitless search
For healing words
Stanzas fast enough to capture the justice
That always eludes us

My Bic can't extract 19 of 41 bullets (3 in the soles of his feet)
Or resurrect an innocent man
My metaphors are no match for the
Cancerous racism that mutates every institution,
Every mind to some degree in this nation
Dispatching legal assassins trained to
Sniff our scents
Shoot first, make up answers later
I believe they were following orders
We were never meant to survive and
Sometimes they succeed
Wiping Amadou's blood off their semi-automatics
Then going home to kiss their wives and
Tuck their kids safely in bed
While we count our dead
But they were afraid
Afraid of perceived spooks
Not in sync with fake fairytales
Those people in the street
Black arms, brown arms, yellow arms, red arms, white arms
Waving wallets like flags at half-mast
Are tired of dying, of their friends dying
Because of racist hysteria
What about their fear?
In the streets scared that Amadou will join the
Ancient debt of this land
Easily buried with the cops' crimes
And they will eat bullets
Tomorrow

Once again expected to turn natural, righteous rage
Into sunshine
Accept carnage like communion and sing sweet spirituals
America mistakes as forgiveness
For apologies never received

THIS IS NOT OK

Being massacred on your doorstep
For having black skin
Police brutality **is the sin**
Courts lying by omission **is the sin**

Sabotage by moving the case to Albany from the Bronx **is the sin**
Apathy and lack of outrage from all people
Who consider themselves human **is the sin**
Excuse me for being fresh out of solace
For his mother
I don't want to tell her
It will be ok, we shall overcome someday
I want to tell her the killers will pay
But I can't
None of us can
2000 and the truth is STILL denied with
a riddled body right before our eyes
He had a name
a heartbeat
dreams

This limp, impotent pen
Is worthless
And until these slayings cease
So is the pen
That wrote the constitution ▲

NOTE: Originally from Nashville, TN, Kamilah Aisha Moon currently lives in Baltimore, MD. Her work appears in several regional publications, most recently in "Bittersweet", an anthology of contemporary women's poetry edited by Karen McCarthy and published by The Women's Press in London, UK. Ms. Moon has performed at various poetry venues in Tennessee, Georgia, Maryland, DC, and NYC.

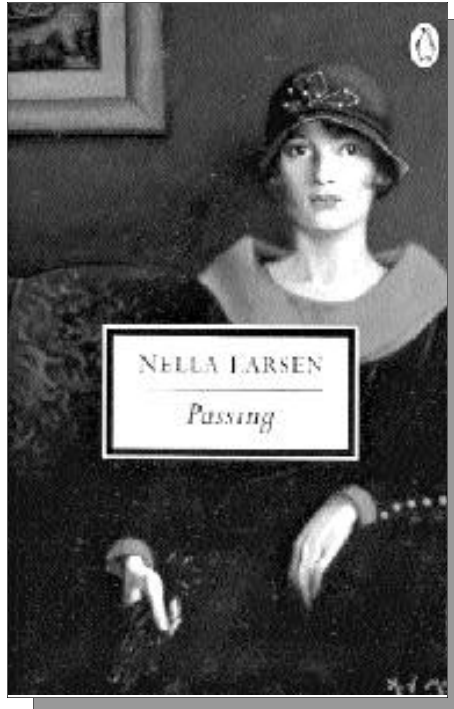


On February 4th, 1999, the NYPD gave Amadou Diallo the right to remain silent. And they did it without ever saying a word. Firing 41 bullets in 8 seconds, the police killed an unarmed, innocent man. Also wounded that night was the constitutional right of every American to due process of law. Help us defend your rights. Support the ACLU. www.aclu.org **american civil liberties union**

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Passing Into Middle Class

By Dasha Jackson



The plot of Nella Larsen's *Passing* is full of intrigue, suspense, and twist. The story contains various issues and themes which center around the characters of Irene Westover Redfield and Clare Kendry Bellew. These characters shape the plot and through them the action in the novel unfolds.

Passing engages the reader immediately through its flashback at the novel's beginning. Irene Westover Redfield is remembering the encounter she had had two

years before with Clare Kendry Bellew. Clare is a childhood acquaintance of Irene's who had been part of the Black working class. Her father had been a janitor and was killed in a saloon fight. After his death, Clare went to live with her White great aunts on her father's side. Her aunts forced Clare to earn her keep through arduous house work and they forbid her to speak of her race or her Southside roots. Obeying their instructions made it easy for Clare to pass for White when she finally decided to. There were no questions about her ancestry since her aunts were respectable White people and no one knew her to be otherwise. For Clare, passing was her ticket to all the economic advantages she had never known. She tells Irene, "You had all the things I wanted and never had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others" (Larsen 159). Later she asserts, "Money's awfully nice to have. In fact, all things considered, I think, 'Rene, that it's even worth the price" (Larsen 160).

Irene does not believe that passing would be worth the price. When Clare asks her why she never passed she quickly answers with disdain, "Why should I.... You see, Clare, I've everything I want" (Larsen 160). And that she does. Irene grew up in a middle-class Black society and carefully orchestrated her life in order to maintain this status. To do so meant insisting that her husband Brian, "stick to his profession right there in New York" instead of fulfilling his dream to go to Brazil. Irene was adamant that Brian pursue his profession as a doctor in New York. She recalls how, regarding going to Brazil, she "had so firmly opposed him, so sensibly pointed out its utter impossibility and its probable consequences to her and the boys, and had even hinted at a dissolution of their marriage in the event of his persistence in his idea" (Larsen 187). As a result, Brian stopped speaking of his desire to go to Brazil, but it "yet lived within him" and Irene's fear of his longing stole "away the sense of security" (Larsen 187). She was afraid because Brian had recently had renewed feelings of restlessness and she did not know how these feelings would effect the life she had created for them.

Similarly, Clare is also getting restless. She is growing tired of the White life she has chosen. So when she reunites with Irene at the Drayton restaurant, Clare sees in Irene an outlet from her life. She is anxious to re-establish a relationship with Irene, and insists that Irene visit her house. Irene tries for days to avoid Clare's invitation, but she is so persistent that Irene eventually acquiesces. When Irene arrives at Clare's house she finds that Gertrude Martin is also present. Gertrude, while not quite passing, looks White and has married a White man. Gertrude and Clare together make Irene uncomfortable during their meeting. "Later, when she examined her feelings of annoyance, Irene admitted, a shade reluctantly, that it arose from a feeling of being outnumbered, a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and

kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of life as well" (Larsen 166). While Irene is ill at ease with the other two women, she becomes even more so once Clare's husband, John Bellew, arrives. He is not only White; he is also a racist. He calls Clare "Nig" and explains that he does so because, "when [they] were first married, she was as white as —as—well as white as a lily. But [he] declare[s] she's gettin' darker and darker. [He] tell[s] her if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger" (Larsen 171). While the irony in this comment is so obvious that it is humorous, it also reveals the depth of racist hatred Bellew has for Blacks. He goes on to call Blacks "The black scrimy devils" and to say that though he does not plan to ever meet a Black person, he had "read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people. And.... 'worse' " (Larsen 172).

Needless to say, Irene and Gertrude both are appalled that John behaved as he did and that Clare would knowingly subject them to his behavior. But Irene feels that Clare's act was "exactly like Clare Kendry. Taking a chance, and not at all considering anyone else's feelings" (Larsen 175). Irene is thoroughly disgusted, and wants no more contact with Clare. Clare sends Irene a letter in which she says, "It may just be, that after all, your way may be the wise and infinitely happier one. I'm not sure just now. At least not so sure as I have been" (Larsen 178). This letter does not appease Irene, but it does illustrate that Clare is seriously reconsidering her life as a White person. She is becoming increasingly restless in her present situation. She later says to Irene:

It was that [the meeting at Clare's house], partly, that has made me want to see other people. It just swooped down and changed everything. If it hadn't been for that, I'd have gone on to the end, never seeing any of you. But that did something to me, and I've been so lonely since! You can't know. Not close to a single soul. Never anyone to really talk to (Larsen 196).

Her interactions with Irene have caused her to realize her dissatisfaction with her life. Her letter is an attempt to maintain contact with Irene and symbolically her Blackness, but Irene rebuffs her. So intent is Clare to establish ties with Irene that she writes another letter to her two years later. And again, Irene does not respond.

Clare does not desist and instead she finally comes to Irene's house unannounced. In the course of the meeting, Clare artfully insists that Irene allow her to go to the Negro Welfare League (NWL) dance. After Irene agrees, she notes that:

Clare, it seemed, still retained her ability to secure the thing that she wanted in the face of any opposition, and in utter disregard of the convenience and desire of others. About her there was some quality, hard and persistent, with the strength pass and endurance of rock, that would not be beaten or ignored. (Larsen 201).

Clare's insistence pays off, and she goes to the NWL dance where she dances "frequently with Brian" (Larsen 204). It was this dance that "marked the beginning of a new factor in Irene Redfield's life, something that left its trace on all the future years of her existence. It was the beginning of a new friendship with Clare Kendry" (Larsen 208). Clare makes frequent visits to the house and Irene "could never be sure whether her comings were a joy or a vexation" (Larsen 208). Clare totally infiltrates Irene's existence including her family, servants, and social engagements.

During one of these frequent visits Clare tells Irene, "Can't you realize that I'm not like you a bit? Why, to get the things I want badly enough, I'd do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away. Really, 'Rene, I'm not safe'" (Larsen 210). Irene sees just how true this statement is the evening she is preparing to have a tea at her house. Shortly before the event, she discovers that her husband is having an affair with Clare. Irene had noticed changes in Brian, but she could not identify what they meant. He went from the restlessness that he exhibited before he met Clare to behaving like "a man marking time, waiting.... It was as if he had stepped out beyond her reach into some section, strange and walled, where she could not get at him."

(continued next page)



but the box office,
 a humongous favor,
 if they just keep their big
 “(S)he’s Got Game” butts
 Home Alone.

EPILOGUE:

In the movie of my life,
 I want The Bachelor/Best Man to
 pursue and get the Bubblin’ Brown Sugar, fat, sincere, sepia-skinned,
 Got Smart, kinky-haired, professional,
 Drop Squad member, Five on the Black Hand Side,
 gorgeous girl with glasses,
 In Seven decades of,
 surprisingly fresh,
 critically acclaimed sequels,
 the dynamic duo
 wrestle with worldly evil,
 and overcome a portion of it, repeatedly saving Gotham City.

Flying,
 The King and I,
 African Queen-sized cape flapping, Bantu barrette Gone With the
 Wind,
 To hang together in the Bat Cave, Where the outside World (not
 According to Garp) sometimes seems upside down to both of us,

Where the Best Man only drinks my Koffee,
 drops to his Superman praying Mantis knees nightly,
 to thank Oh God! for this
 Pretty Woman who was never a whore,
 Except for the director’s cut,
 lying on the editing room floor with my 36K/L bra and
 size 8 panties,
 for about Nine and a Half Weeks,
 for the love of him when my pocket pager told me “You’ve Got Mail,”
 after he made that speed dial
 Booty Call that’s only got my number programmed
 and ratings went from GP to
 “Gee puleeeze
 close those curtains baby,
 What will the neighbors say?”
 Well Malcolm what did you X-pect in an American film but another,
 now more for real,
 Happy Ending?
 ROLL CREDITS. ▲

E-K. Daufin teaches communication at Alabama State University and does cultural, as well as music programming for WVAS-FM, Montgomery. Co-founder of the Southeast Poetry and Jazz Connection, Daufin is a popular performance artist.



Ravenous
 26"x20"x16"
 clay



Things Don't Add UP #1
 28"x12"x5"
 clay/mixed media



Yes, Yes, Yes
 24"x16"x16"
 clay



Spotlight ESSAY on Ghanaian Drama

By: John K. Djisenu

Introduction

I have set out to examine two main schools of thought that have emerged through the smoke screen of controversy surrounding the definition of Drama in Ghana. The first one, which I refer to as the ritual school, classifies rituals, rites or ceremonies in indigenous Ghanaian societies as Drama or theatre, and usually applies to such labels as: “ceremonial-drama,” “ritual-drama” or “magical-drama.” I prefer to refer to the second one as the “festival-school” in that it defines Ghanaian festivals as drama.

A careful look at indigenous Ghanaian societies reveals a life style that is integrated with their religion and beliefs as well as their rites, rituals, ceremonies and festivals. What is observed is that because their lives are inseparable from their rites of passage, any attempt by both schools of thought to label any of those rites as Drama leads us into a pointless debate about where the scope of Drama begins or ends.

This paper brings out the fundamental flaws inherent in both the ritual and festival schools of thought and suggests a new approach through a re-definition of Drama as an art form that reflects creatively any aspect of life, including even social life in the indigenous setting.

▼ THE RITUAL SCHOOL

The ritual school defines Drama as being “associated with social, ritual or ceremonial occasions.”¹ This sets off a controversy as the definition widens the scope of Drama to include the following:

1. Birth, outdooing and naming rights;
2. Circumcision and puberty rites as well as other initiation rites;
3. Enstoolment, destoolment and ancestral stool rites as well as oaths of allegiance;
4. Marriage and divorce rights;
5. Funeral rites and their associated occupational and memorial dances;
6. Acts of worship, possession dances and libation;
7. Rites of ancestor worship and festivals.

The above list of rites of passage forms the basis of life in Ghana and, indeed, the whole of Africa, particularly within the traditional or indigenous setting. They are the life cycles around which all social, religious or political occasions revolve. There is no doubt that celebrating them tends to be action packed, spectacular, colourful and symbolic, but my contention is that classifying them as Drama is controversial.

Joe de Graft, for instance, makes his membership of the ritual school clear when he declares:

...To me, theatre, at its most beautiful is ritual. It's closely related to religion. To put simply, theatre at its centre is religion and ritual...²

No doubt, in his article “*Roots in African Drama and Theatre*”³ de Graft describes a voodoo ritual of initiation⁴ as magical-drama. He identifies the roles played in it as impersonation even though in that performance there was a transmigration of spirits through spells that made the goat sick and the girl docile and entranced. They were constrained and became like automatons in the hands of the voodoo priest.

The girl was placed face-to-face with the goat, and after an elaborate ritual of invocation of powers was held that both of them had been spiritually transformed: the girl into a goat, and the goat into a girl. Soon, the girl began to bleat like a goat and nibble at leaves while the goat cried like the girl. At this point, the goat's head was severed. Instantly, the girl collapsed only to be carried away unconsciously for another voodoo rite of revival.

There are a number of spiritual elements that make the art of Drama incompatible with such rites of passage as the initiation into a voodoo cult described above. Some of these are the use of spells and invocation of powers that control or transform the objects of the ritual. There are also other spiritual connotations like animal sacrifices and

the use of blood.

Again, in de Graft's example above, where does the actor, the Drama scholar or researcher draw the lines between the voodoo religion, its magical aspects and the use of sorcery? All these mean that we cannot easily classify indigenous rituals as Drama.

▼ RITUAL OF WORSHIP

A second proponent of the Ghanaian ritual school is J.H. Nketiah, as can be seen from his article on “*Possession Dances in African Societies*.”⁵ In the article, he gives a classic description of a typical indigenous ritual of worship, which he describes as folk drama, and from which some lessons will be drawn to illustrate some facts.

First, what is noted from Nketiah's ritual of worship, like most rituals, is a performance with formal, rigid scheme: the drummers come first, followed by the singers before the senior priest consecrates the worship circle. Also, the ritual order requires that the senior priest must dance before all the others do. Second, there are libations, prayers and spiritual possessions that reach climax with the “medium of the chief god of the town.” Third, once the worship circle has been consecrated, those who become possessed cannot enter unless they have taken off their earrings and blouses. The noteworthy fourth point is that a message is communicated by the gods or the objects of worship through the senior medium to the people to live peacefully. It is only after these “sacred” phases of the ritual are over that the worship circle is declared open to general audience population.

To be able to describe an indigenous ritual as Drama, such as the example given above, one must first clarify a number of knotty religious controversies. Any typical act of worship has religious functions as one may observe in Ghanaian traditional societies where gods, spirits or supernatural entities are worshipped in addition to dead ancestors, chiefs and kings who may be enshrined in stools and fed with food and liquor periodically.⁶ One thing that underpins the ritual of worship is the “sacred” religious element. The dancing priest in the traditional worship is translating his faith through movements or dance, and embodied in that are rituals of thanksgiving, reverence, breaking of eggs and sacrifices of ritual animals, some of which may not be open to the public. Thus, the element of faith is paramount in all these, an element that is not a necessary ingredient in Drama. One writer echoes the same sentiments when he states:

Drama, it might be said, began when seeing was freed from the shackles of believing: when understanding became possible without an immediate interior change of heart.⁷

Secondly, the possessed priest, unlike the actor of Drama, is spiritually transformed because he cannot make absolute, conscious choices in the use of his body and voice. What is, in fact, presented is the physical and vocal manifestation of a spiritual entity that has entered him. Once possessed, he becomes the medium of the god he worships who influences or even constrains his jerky movements, gyrations and gibberish manner of speech. He may exercise some amount of control, in order not to hurt himself, but he is still largely ruled and controlled by unseen forces to whose will he is subject.

Thirdly, the possessed priest communicates a message from the gods to the people usually through a fetish linguist. Thus, the priest serves as the mouthpiece of “his god in order to offer advice to petitioners and to prophesy events.”⁸ The priest cannot be said to be acting because he becomes a spiritual middleman; an intermediary between a god and the worshippers or his audience. What he communicates is from a god to man. An actor, on the other hand, is an intermediary between an imaginative creative art and an audience. What he communicates is from man (a creative piece by man) to man (audience). It is difficult to see how the ritual school can label the Ghanaian traditional act of worship as folk drama, or even suggest that spiritual possession within the same context is impersonation and therefore, a form of acting. Clearly, the issues involved in traditional worship relate to the spiritual realm in which rituals and possessions are geared toward a

on Ghanaian Drama

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mythology as their reference in commenting, severely criticising or poking fun at their own societies. This type of Greek Drama is missing from our festivals where one observes two main levels of activities: public and non-public rituals, and socio-politico-cultural celebrations.

One thing our festivals share with the classical Greeks is an element of ritual, including ritual of worship. The Greeks were polytheists and the Drama was done in honour of their gods, Dionysus (sometimes referred to as Bacchus and known as the god of wine and fertility) whose image was placed in the open-air theatre. Their performances of plays were not a substitute for the rituals done as part of the worship of the god, which was a separate and more elaborate activity.²⁰

Though the Drama performances were partly a religious activity because it was done to honour a god, it was mainly a civic and secular event open to the general public (including women and children and even sometimes prisoners and slaves). During the performance, prizes were awarded to deserving playwrights and others who had distinguished themselves in different areas of public life. In ancient Greek mythology, the gods became involved in the affairs of men and women, which were sometimes portrayed in the Dramas as conflicts between spiritual entities and humans. The Drama performed at the City Dionysia, on the other hand, was a creative communication between man and man: one from live human actors, not possessed by any spiritual entities, to a live human audience.

The Greek playwrights, especially Aeschylus and Sophocles, may have generally portrayed a god-centred society in which the power of gods could not be devalued and challenged by human ingenuity (i.e. Oedipus Rex). There was, however, no indication of actors, chorus or the playwrights and the audience showing "a common act of devotion" to the gods. A case in point is Euripides' *Bacchae* which shows the god Dionysus as vindictive, and questions, through sophistry, the basis of the worship of such a god. The playwrights did not see themselves as writing liturgies or rituals for the worship of Dionysus. Neither did the actors in the ancient Greek plays see their roles as an act of worship nor as a translation of their faith to make Dionysus intervene spiritually on their behalf, nor were they the mouthpieces of the god. The actors were not possessed spiritual mediums or intermediaries communicating messages from the Greek gods or Dionysus. They were flesh-and-blood men performing artistically to a human audience who did not see themselves as worshippers in a Greek temple, but as a civic audience in an open-air theatre.

▼ CONTROVERSY ARISING FROM SOME COMMON ELEMENTS

The controversy arising from the erroneous classification of rituals, rites or ceremonies and festivals as Drama may result from the presence of certain common elements they share with Drama, like the following:

1. Language, words or symbols.
2. Action, impersonation or performance.
3. Audience, crowd or onlookers.
4. Movement, dance, posture or gesture.
5. Music or sound.
6. Spectacle, visual arts or impressions.
7. Use of props, costumes, masks, make-up, food, liquors and so on.

The above elements make all the rituals, rites or ceremonies and festivals have a quality of performance that is live and experiential though, as already argued, they are not in themselves Drama, but merely contain some of its elements and are still part of indigenous Ghanaian life.

▼ CONCLUSION

The arguments outlined above exclude rituals, rites, festivals and other traditional ceremonies from the scope of the definition of Drama. I contend that it is untenable to classify them as forms of Drama regardless of their full integration with indigenous Ghanaian life or religion. It is maintained, though, that these phenomena may serve as

the sources of creative inputs, but they must first undergo the creative process of conscious selection of material, re-ordering, re-shaping or, in some cases, complete metamorphosis with inessential details stripped off for effective creative communication to an audience. The rites of passage are not Drama in their present form. Instead, they are the indispensable hubs, around which the cycles of traditional life revolve, and are meant to perform specific religious, social and political functions.

Drama is defined more efficiently by J.R. Djisenu, I believe, as:

A creative communicative art, text-based or not that takes place in space, time and rhythm, and is done by performers who use the creative techniques of voice and movement to affect an audience. The creative communicative art is usually rehearsed and performed over a period of time. Drama is, essentially, a creative work of performing art. It is not just mere lifting of life onto a performance base. That raw material from life undergoes a creative metamorphosis in order to become an art form.²¹

This definition applies to both the traditional and contemporary settings. It means, for instance, that indigenous forms of narrative or story-telling Drama that may be derived from myths, legends and other oral traditional sources are embodied in this definition. The scope of the definition also includes non-worship or non-ritual forms of dance-dramas that narrate stories or histories like the creative *Atsiagbekor* dance of the Ewes that recount part of their history of migration. It also includes syncretic and eclectic forms such as the *concert-party* Drama and other song-based *cantatas*. The contemporary forms include radio and television drama as well as puppetry and numerous text-based or improvised forms of Drama that abound in the country.

The challenge for creative artists in the third millennium will be their ambidexterity in tapping creative inputs from both the contemporary setting and the vast raw materials found in indigenous rites of passage for use in the art of creative communication known as Drama. Certainly, a few playwrights and other artists have already done some pioneering work, but a lot more lies ahead.

Rituals or rites, festivals and other traditional ceremonies are very controversial to define as Drama in their present form when they are still encapsulated with the religious, social and political life of indigenous societies. Drama does not simply reflect any form of life, contemporary or traditional, without any conscious creative selection and re-ordering of its original sources of material. ▲

1 See "Elements of Traditional Drama," Legon, Accra: Publications Unit, Institute of African Studies, P. 11. This is a very influential paper with no author or date on sale at the Publication Unit.

2 See de Graft's (1980) interview in *Mazungumso No. 4*. A publication of Ohio University Centre for International Studies (Africa Programme).

3 See de Graft's (1976) "Roots in African Drama and Theatre" in *African Literature Today*, No. 8.

4 For details, read Chapter 5 of Seabrook, W.B., *The Magic Island*, 1929. New York, Harcourt Brace and Company, Inc. Illustrated by Alexander King.

5 Nketiah, J. H., "Possession Dances in Africa," Legon, Accra: Publications Unit, Institute of African Studies. Another influential paper with no date, though the date of the events described is noted as July 3, 1955 in Gold Coast (Ghana).

6 Spirits of dead ancestors or chiefs and kings are worshipped in indigenous societies in Ghana. They are usually enshrined in stools, fed with food and drinks, sacrificed to, and consulted for spiritual reasons. These practices are based on the belief that life continues after death.

7 See Wicker, B., 1973, *The Roots of Ritual*, p. 18-19.

8 See Swithenbank, M., 1969, *Ashanti Fetish Houses*, p. 11.

9 See Agovi, J. K., 1980, *Presence Africaine*, No. 66, p. 144.

10 See Cole, H. M., 1975, *African Arts*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Spring, p. 12

11 Ibid., p. 60.

12 Agovi, J. K., op. cit., p. 145.

13 See Opoku, A. A., 1970, *Festivals of Ghana*, p. 54-56

14 Agovi, J. K., op. cit., p. 158.

15 Cole, H. M., op. cit., p. 12.

16 See Jones, R. E., 1941, *The Dramatic Imagination: Reflections and Speculations on the Art of the Theatre*, p. 93-94, 115.

17 Turner, V., 1982, *From Ritual to Theatre*, p. 8, 10-11.

18 Ibid., p. 11.

19 Agovi, J. K., op. cit., p. 157.

20 Mitchell, L. L., 1977, *The Meaning of Ritual*, p. 55.

21 See Djisenu, J. K., 1995, *Legon Journal of Humanities*, Vol. 8., p. 58. Read also the whole article from p. 55-62 for the full discussion of the elements and other characteristics of Drama as an art form.

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A Symposium Overview

By: Solange Jacobs

Last October, Stanford University was home to a symposium called *Making the Spirit of 20th and 21st Century Culture: Placing Black Popular Culture and Performance*. Sponsored by the Black Popular Culture Workshop and the Committee on Black Performing Arts, the event drew participants from various fields and attracted scores of attendees from the university and beyond.

Although the symposium was held six months ago, it is still possible to see it. An online webcast, by the Stanford Center for Professional Development, can be viewed at stanford-online.stanford.edu/spirit/. For viewing, you have to download and install Microsoft Media Player, which is freely available on the Internet. As with most video streaming, the picture is fragmented and a bit jumpy, but if you missed the symposium, this webcast will prove invaluable.

The symposium began October 8, 1999, with a keynote address by Stanford's Provost (now future President) John Hennessy. Spoken word artist and performer Will Power, who gave an excerpt of his latest work, "The Gathering," followed him. Manthia Diawara, Professor of Africana Studies at New York University and editor of *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noir*, set the stage for the rest of the weekend with his presentation, "Black Performance as the First Human Language."

The first panel, "Territories and Premises of Black Popular Culture and Black Performance," started early Saturday. This panel focused on modes of Black performance, while examining how evolving meanings of Blackness influence popular culture and performance. Choreographer Donald Byrd, Glenda Dickerson of the University of Michigan, Stanford's Paulla Ebron, Richard Green of NYU, and former Black Arts Quarterly editor Jacqueline Wigfall, were important contributors to this discussion.

Later that afternoon, a diverse group convened to discuss how Black performance changes when it reaches new audiences or environments. The question posed, "How Does Black Travel?" was well answered by English professor W. T. Lhamon (Florida State University), critical writer and lecturer Kobena Mercer; editors Eric Nakamura and Martin Wong (*Giant Robot Magazine*), Joe Nash, the nation's foremost archivist and historian of African American dance, and vocalist Linda Tillery (Cultural Heritage Choir). The panel spoke of the blending of Black popular culture and performance, and its implications for contemporary and future global development of popular culture.

Panel Three, "Tearing Down the Fourth Wall: Culture, Performance and Community," looked at issues surrounding the relationship between community involvement and Black performing arts and popular culture. The panel included the Director of the Committee on Black Performing Arts and Drama Professor Harry J. Elam, Todd Boyd (University of Southern California), actor and director Rhodessa Jones (The Medea Project), Sociology Professor Bennetta Jules-Rosette (UC-San Diego), and Keith Antar Mason of the Hittite Empire also presented papers during this panel.

In Saturday's final panel, the discussion centered on the representation of Blacks in film, television, and advertising. Panelist Cheo Coker - a screenwriter - asserted that the typically negative stereotypes of Blacks in media would not change until African Americans reach the executive and decision-making level in major media conglomerates. Nicole Hickman, Ph.D. candidate in Modern Thought and Literature at Stanford, showed a short film she produced. The panel also included Professor Emeritus James Gibbs (Stanford), Sociology Professor Herman Gray (UC-Santa Cruz), English Professor Valerie Smith (UC-Los Angeles), and Byron Lewis, Chairman and CEO of UniWorld Group.

Sunday's first panel posed questions as to how—particularly given the developments of information technology—market commodification, changing political dynamics, and Black cultural influences might be felt in the future. This discussion was moderated by Stanford History professor Michael Thompson, and included Aboubakar Sanogo former fellow at the National Museum of African Arts, poet Jessica Care Moore (Moore Black Press), Verve recording artist Christian McBride, and History Professor Kennell Jackson, author of "America is Me."

The symposium culminated in a roundtable discussion during which panelists discussed the involvement of art and performance in social policy. The audience was invited to participate in the discussion, turning it into a lively conversation. The six panelists were Kalamu Chaché (Young Women's Consortium), Quentin Easter (Lorraine Hansberry Theatre), professor Shirley Brice Heath of Stanford, Angela Johnson (Oakland Department of Cultural Affairs), Thomas Simpson (Afro-Solo Theatre), and Margaret Wilkerson of the Ford Foundation.

The overwhelming success of the Spirit symposium is a rewarding result of the hard work by staff of the Black Popular Culture Workshop and the Committee on Black Performing Arts, including Harry Elam, Kim Fowler, Robert Moses and Elena Becks. The student staff at the CBPA—Rasanah Goss, Willie Duncan, and particularly Lauren Veasey, the student volunteer coordinator—also deserve mention for their time and effort.▲





Black Arts Quarterly Call for Papers

DEADLINE: September 15, 2000

What is “Black” in the 21st century? What are the implications for Black performance and the arts?

These questions will focus our discussion in the next issue of the BAQ. Blackness has changed throughout the many years of our experience in this country. The physical Black face is changing, slowly but undeniably. Our professional status is also slowly evolving, as Blacks take their place in fields from which we have been historically barred. Without denying the problematic nature of this integration, we must agree that we have established for ourselves a permanent position within American society. Moreover, our collective artistic expressions and performances have been accepted and adapted in mainstream society.

Papers and other submissions should focus on how Black music, arts, and cultural expressions have altered and will alter pop culture in the 21st century. During this time, our perceptions of ourselves as Black people may be changing—will our performance and artistic work reflect or portray these changing perceptions?

What new ideas are emerging from the Black performance studies and cultural expressions? What new themes, structures, and formats will Black artists investigate in coming years? How do shifting concepts of race and community impact Black artistic expression?

Unrelated to Black performance, submissions may also revolve around our relationship to mainstream society in the 21st century. Consider the following guides:

- *the American notion of progress and human advancement: where do we fit in?*
- *the Internet and its influence on the way we learn, teach, discover*
- *the world today is globally-oriented like never before: what does this mean for our counterparts in Africa and other parts of the Diaspora?*
- *American legislative policy affecting minorities today and in the next hundred years: predictions, suggestions, considerations*

Academic analyses, as well as essays, poetry, artwork, and other forms of prose will be considered. Please access BAQ back issues at www.stanford.edu/group/CBPA/BAQ.html

With regard to submissions, send photographs of visual submissions (and if possible, a disk with the picture of your art scanned onto it in gif or pict format) with a self-addressed, stamped envelope to ensure return after review. All submissions must be accompanied by a 2-4 sentence author-bio. Submit literary submissions on Mac disc in Microsoft Word. Forward all submissions, queries or suggestions to: Black Arts Quarterly, Committee on Black Performing Arts (CBPA), Harmony House, 561 Lomita Drive, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305. If you submit visual or literary text via e-mail or in attachment file, send to lenochka@stanford.edu.

The BAQ can be reached by phone (650) 723-4402.





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