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Pocomania Rituals and Identity in Andrew Salkey's a Quality of Violence (1959)

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Abstract

Introduction-The quest for identity construction knew its apogee in the burgeoning Caribbean literature of the 1950's, a period marked by a great tide of immigration to London and the exile of a significant number of West Indian writers. This exile generation of West Indian writers, including leading figures such as George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, Andrew Salkey, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, V.S Naipaul, was concerned with depicting their West Indian experience and dealing with issues revolving around liberty and identity.The representation of rituals is a leitmotif in a wide range of Caribbean novels. The return to the culture of the folk and the minute depiction of traditional performances can be construed as a means whereby West Indian writers seek to rewrite the community and excavate its voice by commemorating communal values and belief systems, hence showing that their culture has its own validity and should be valued on its own terms.

Index terms—

1 Pocomania Rituals and Identity in Andrew

Salkey's a Quality of Violence (1959) Lamia ZAIBI "One of the most enduring-and most appropriated and misunderstood-markers of cultural difference and stability in both Africa and India is ritual." (Gilbert and Tompkins, 55) In Post-colonial drama: theory, practice and politics **??**1996), Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins argue that the critical study of rituals has focused on drawing the commonalties between ritual actions rather than the specificities and differences between them. They hence put emphasis on the importance of reading rituals as culture specific enactments which have a special function and purpose. This perspective will be taken into account in the analysis of Afro-Jamaican rituals in A Quality of Violence **??**1959) as a means whereby cultural difference is articulated and maintained.

In this article, I will attempt to show, through a close reading of Andrew Salkey's A Quality of Violence, the way the representation of rituals functions as a site of resistance and liberation. My choice to study this sample novel is directed at demonstrating how Afro-Jamaican rituals, like Pocomania, are used as a backdrop to restore the sense of community and contribute in forging national identity. Special attention will be given to the way rituals are a site of collective memory as they open a discursive space for expressing communal values. This will allow revealing the inextricable link between ritual enactments and identity construction. Indeed, Pocomania ritual plays a central role in the novel as it determines and shapes the course of events. Much room is given to religious practices and their vital role in the daily lives of the community members. Much of the action is set within the framework of rites and religious enactments which mould the flow of the narrative and trigger the main events.

The story is about the St. Thomas Parish community struck by a drought and the different responses to it. The drought triggers a series of events marked by intense antagonism between characters. In the opening pages, the reader is introduced to the ongoing conflict between the black masses and the small class of land owners. The rift widens when the black majority resorts to African-inspired religious rituals to bring water to

the land. In direct opposition to the large (and basically nameless) peasant group who seek Author: University of Manouba. e-mail: l.zaibi@tunet.tn salvation in Pocomania and its rituals of sacrifice and dance, the Marshalls and the Parkins are sceptical about these practices. This is the dramatic context within which the social and racial composition of the Jamaican society is examined by Salkey. In the first part of this article, I will try to provide a brief overview on the syncretic nature of ritualistic practices in an attempt to show how the seeds of resistance lie within this very hybrid nature. In the second part, I will show the way ritual enactments are a site for expressing the community's culture, shedding light on their liberating and regenerative power. In the last part of this article, I will draw conclusions on Salkey's ambivalent representation of rituals of sacrifice in terms of the dialectics of empowerment and destruction.

My close reading will be informed by Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompinks' analysis of rituals as a site where the community is given prominence as rites are enacted to preserve the order and the continuity of the community (55). It will also be grounded on the premises of K. Brathwaite, F. Fanon and W. Harris who each differently highlight the healing power and liberating force of the spiritual practices and the way they are a "collective survival mechanism." 1 I.

2 Introduction

he quest for identity construction knew its apogee in the burgeoning Caribbean literature of the 1950's, a period marked by a great tide of immigration to London and the exile of a significant number of West Indian writers. This exile generation of West Indian writers, including leading figures such as George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, Andrew Salkey, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, V.S Naipaul, was concerned with depicting their West Indian experience and dealing with issues revolving around liberty and identity.

The representation of rituals is a leitmotif in a wide range of Caribbean novels. The return to the culture of the folk and the minute depiction of traditional performances can be construed as a means whereby West Indian writers seek to rewrite the community and excavate its voice by commemorating communal values and belief systems, hence showing that their culture has its own validity and should be valued on its own terms.

However, the West Indian writers' treatment of ritualistic practices can be read as the background against which they draw upon the "spiritual trauma" which the indigenous people of the Caribbean and Africans brought to the plantations have undergone (Saillant, 89). Hence, one cannot read rituals without taking into account the specificity of the Caribbean experience.

3 II.

The Syncretic Nature of Afro-Caribbean Rituals

The West Indian colonial experience has a salient religious aspect. The colonial plantation system led to the mercantilist trade called the Middle Passage and the long history of exploitation of Africans as cheap labour. African slaves worked on the plantations and were subjected to the rule of their masters. They were not only uprooted from their land but also from their history and culture, particularly their religious practices. They were led and often forced to adopt the Christian values and way of life, and were gradually co-opted into the socio-political structure of the Christian culture in which they were more often than not seen as belonging to the lowest rung of the social ladder.

However, the Christian indoctrination upon which the imperial enterprise is based has not resulted into a complete erasure of the existing belief-systems but rather into a double spiritual heritage which accounts for the birth of syncretic religious practices. The various Caribbean religious practices, such as Pocomania in Jamaica and Voodoo in Haiti, to name but a few are an amalgamation of African and Christian beliefs. They were born out of a process of cultural exchange and cultural Creolisation. Kamau Brathwaite's idea that this process of cultural exchange and intermixing results in the production and emergence of novel forms that are totally a "new construct," though they accommodate strands from the dominant culture, finds a parallel in E. Glissant's model.

Glissant's definition of Creolisation in terms of what he calls the "poetics of relation" and the "poetics of becoming" is worth mentioning (qtd. in Britton, 12). The former refers to the construction of a relation that opens up a space for diversity and difference, which is positive in the sense that the contact with a different culture allows the creation of new forms; the latter implies that all the cultural forms and modes emerging out of this contact bear their own specificity and difference, in the sense that they are totally reworked and transformed into something new, something mainly Caribbean in spirit and essence. My discussion of the syncretic nature of Afro-Caribbean belief systems is informed by Kamau Brathwaite's key phrase "torn and new," 2 Voodoo and Pocomania are emblematic of this dialectics for they engage with Christianity, accommodate Christian elements such as biblical images, reinterpret and transform them into idiosyncratic and distinctive forms in concordance to the Caribbean context. They work through a blending of Christian doctrine and African elements and are in a sense a synthesis of both belief-systems. Both Pocomania and which sheds light on the predicament of the Caribbean archipelago, its history of slavery and colonisation and the way this very fragmentation made up for the emergence of new Caribbean cultural forms (qtd. in Arnold et al., 258). It is a good entry into the way Afro-Caribbean beliefs have been altered, distorted and transformed into something new. It implies that Caribbean cultural forms are somehow the relics of a shattered past that bear the legacy of the past traumas

especially that of the "Middle Passage"; it is this shattering that allows for an outlet for resistance and liberation from the domineering forces of oppression.

Afro-Caribbean religious practices are hence inscribed within a dialectics of incorporation and transformation, marking the paradigm shifts from a monolithic belief system to a polytheistic one. They do not work through binary oppositions of either/or but form "new anti-monolithic models of cultural exchange and growth" (Ashcroft, 183). As such, they are neither completely African nor totally Christian, but in-between belief-systems based on turning sameness into difference and difference into sameness, hence offering unstable and ambivalent alternatives (Young, 26). This neither-nor nature of Afro-Caribbean religions is a break from essentialist and monolithic religions, and a celebration of flexible and ever changing religious practices.

In a sense, the appropriation of the coloniser's belief-system dovetails an act of usurpation and transformation. It brings into play a double process of resistance. On the one hand, it works through a subtle process of undermining and investing the coloniser's belief system, thus challenging the essentialism upon which Eurocentric power is grounded. The very act of 'Creolising' and 'Africanising' Christian belief-systems is in itself a radical act of resistance for it entails an act of tarnishing and distortion. On the other hand, it is the very act of transformation which is an exquisite moment of creativity. 2 The expression is taken from Brathwaite's poem "Jouvert" in his trilogy The Arrivants **??**1969). It is used to describe the ritual of the Trinidad Carnival, referring to the creativeness of the Steel Band and the way its reworking of the Christian ritual of Easter resulted into new rhythms: "hearts/ no longer bound/ to black and bitter/ ashes in the ground// now walking/ making// making/ with their//rhythms some/thing torn//and new". Voodoo can be regarded as a by-product of this double spiritual heritage which results in the creation of polytheistic belief-systems in which the power of Ashanti and Yoruba deities co-exist with biblical images and figures. Salkey teases this duality and tug of war between between African pagan and Western Christian Culture." (E. Brathwaite, 219-220) There are many instances in the narrative where there is an explicit reference to the syncretic nature of the Caribbean spiritual heritage. The detailed account of the different stages of the ceremony (such as the initiation prayers, in which the new members are brought in front of Dada Johnson and his deputy and touched on their forehead with honey and dirt), as well as the bible reading, reveals the process of appropriation. Through the figure of Mr Marshall, who plays the role of an observer and spectator of the ceremony, Salkey brings to attention the "new twist the meeting-yard" has given to the Bible:

"After a moment they broke into the chant: 'keep foot when you go to the house of God; ready yourself to hear; give sacrifice of fools; don't rash up yourself; watch your mouth, don't utter anything before God because Him in heaven and you is on the earth!' Marshall nudged Brother Parkin and said in a whisper: "The bit you just hear? You recognize it? Brother Parkin said: yes, man. Ecclesiastes. Yes, Ecclesiastes V, I-2. Them change it up, though."(60)

The focus on the spiritual heritage of St. Thomas has a double function. First, it has a religious dimension as it is part and parcel of the sacred life of the community. Second, it has a social dimension for it is at the core of the community's everyday life and a site for expressing its culture. In this perspective, Africanderived Jamaican religious beliefs, like Pocomania, are a marker of cultural identity, and thus a site of resistance.

They are endowed with a redemptive force which can partly be accounted for by the fact that the "African orientation towards evil" is of paramountat the heart of the Jamaican belief systems. In the Jamaican African experience, there is strong emphasis on the idea of freedom for, as Dianne M. Steward Points out: "African-derived Jamaican religions, like Myal, Kumina, Revival Zion, Obeah, Native Baptism or Rastafari, share the common concern of combating evil, disease, misfortune, and supporting reconciliation, harmony, well-being and human fulfilment." (182) III.

4 Rituals as Sites of Communal Empowerment

The liberating force emanating from ritualistic practices operates on two overlapping levels. On the one hand, the performance of rites allows for the creation of a surrogate world which procures the participants with a sense of freedom from daily forms of oppression and an escape from their mundane reality. On the other hand, the creation of this realm is, in turn, a recreation of the world of ancestors, that is, a way to renew a lost bond and free oneself from the traumas of the past.

The reader is drawn into the world of drums percussion and the underlying dances. It is a different way of life that is represented and valued, an authentic one governed by Pocomania. Rites and dances of sacrifice, accompanied by hymns and mento music, colour the life of the community. The community members strive to mould nature and organise sacrifices to implore its clemency. They practise a variety of rites set by the ancestors to do away with the evil forces believed to hover around and bring water to the land. The entire ceremony is framed around the concern to fight social ills and bring a certain order into their chaotic life.

The collective force the ritual procures to its adherents emanates from the fact that it is focalised on community values. Indeed, it is the community which shapes the discourse of the performer and is actually the essence of the performance. This allows Dada Johnson to create a definite space where the community members translate into action their own way of seeing reality. Indeed, he provides them ritually with an alternative vision and a new way to cope with the manifold social problems. He strengthens their feeling of belonging to the community and provides them with the spiritual tools that may help them understand their present situation and envisage their future. As Victor Turner points out, rituals are endowed with the power to redress what he terms as "the social

dramas of everyday life" enabling the community to "scrutinize, portray, understand and then act on itself." (qtd. in Taylor, 99)

The power of the ritual to unify the group stems from the metaphysical and divine power conferred to Dada Johnson, the leader of the Pocomania cult. Indeed, he is jointly consumed by the idea of serving "Giant X" 3 "He knew now that he was the time-serving Giant X, that he was also the master of the Giant X, and and of being the controller of power. He clearly states it in the episode preceding the fight scene that represents the apogee of the ceremony: 3 Giant X has a double meaning: it refers both to the almighty God and the cross road / the meeting yard. Reading Giant X as a reference to the crossroad is informed by the fact that it is part of the Jamaican folk tradition where ceremonies like Pocomania used to take place in Crossroads thus the meaning of the letter X. The idea of the performer and the cultist as « serviteurs » of God refers to the way they incarnate themselves in the bodies of "serviteurs" mainly though possession.

For further reading on the idea of 'serviteurs', see Patrick Taylor, The Narrative of Liberation: Perspectives on Afro-Caribbean Culture and Politics (London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 98.

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maybe, one day, he would be the slaughterer of the Giant X." (68)

It is these two impulses that drive his ritualistic performance and the trance mood he gets into. He defines and sets himself discursively as a bearer and fulfiller of the expectations of the worshippers and spectators, as one endowed with a mission -that of reshaping and recreating faith in the parish. He positions himself, through the skilful use of spiritualist resources such as his capacity to make prophecies, as the sole person liable to instil harmony on the land. His prophecies revive hope and ensure a belief in the force of the community, in the service of collective interest:

"I give those people plenty to believe in. I give them a cause to have a faith [?] He thus creates a discursive space in which he brings into play the liberating power of ritualistic practices and their latent capability to save the life of individuals and change their fortune. Through Dada Johnson's reiteration of his ultimate power to exorcise the devil out of the land and bring about liberation, solace and sympathy, Salkey touches upon the liberating and soothing role of rituals. This finds an echo in the preliminary chants that precede the last stage of the ceremony:

"We must lash the devil out of the land. We must lash good water into the land [?] St Thomas is a dry place, is a wrong place [...] St Thomas is going to be a water place, is going to be a garden place, is going to be a promise like the Promised Land." (69)

The mob mobilisation reaches its climax in the ritualistic fight between Dada Johnson and his deputy, in which each is prodded into a suicidal mood, fervently lashing themselves to death. The spiritual power of the combat reinforces the sense of community. It is emblematic of death rituals, enacted as part of rituals of sacrifice typical of Afro-Caribbean belief-systems. The latter bears common traits with the Ceremony of the Souls in Haiti which frees the spirit of a dead person facilitating his passage into the afterlife. It is animated by chants and prayers that stir the individual's sense of commitment and duty to die for the sake of the community.

The preliminary chants as well as the final prayers reveal the key role rituals play in ensuring the continuity of the community. They also pinpoint the heroic stance of the community members and their willingness to die in an act of absolute surrender for liberation from manifold forms of oppression. This rite of sacrifice takes a symbolic significance in the sense that it is a prerequisite for the survival of the communal folk culture:

"If skin is to cut with lash, then come we lash the skin till water come down and wet the land. If the skin is to break with lash, then come we break the skin till water come down and wet the land. If man must dead with the lash, then come we dead and make water wet we and the land." (69) Indeed, the power of rituals to assert and preserve the viability of the community is at work in death rituals. Death rituals, like Pocomania and Myal, can be read as a cultural and political action in the sense that they stand for the refusal of a culture to die. In this sense, the ceremonious death of Dada Johnson and his deputy translates the cultists' desire to leave their mark; it can also be regarded as an act of recovery of the right to act, to intervene and change the course of history. In short, it is a symbolic act of reassertion of communal rites and therefore a marker of cultural identity.

Moreover, rites are a site of collective memory in the sense that the dance of Sacrifice is a moment of remembering the past through the recreation of the world of ancestors. The latter is a way to reconnect with Africa and African ancestors and thus retrieve and recuperate African culture. Re-establishing links with Africa by speaking to the history of the Middle Passage and acknowledging the traumas of the past accounts for reading the dance of sacrifice as a tool of resistance.

The Pocomania dance is a unique moment where the mob is communally drawn in the spiritual realm to exorcise the evil spirits believed to be the cause of all the ills of the community. The dance of sacrifice is a space in which group unity is at its height: a space in which both participants and spectators vibrate together and go into a state of complete immersion. Hymns of sacrifice, the utterance of pocomaniacal doxologies, raucous singing and the erratic gyrating movements, as well as the use of the dead rooster, are performative tools used to create stupor and intensify the trance mood into which the performers are immersed: "As if seized by the fever generated by the chanting sisters, the deputy jumped back from the Giant X, dropped the cutlass, picked

up the white rooster and wrung the neck [?]They were offering through the blood of the rooster, the gratitude of the meeting-house for the coming season of rain and plenty [?] The deputy still holding the dead rooster and imitating its jerking motions [?] spun about in concentric circles, the neck of the rooster sprinkled jets of blood around the meeting yard. Pocomaniacal doxologies were uttered by everyone." (61-62)

The dance is a space where the cult performers acquire power from communication with their ancestors. The concomitant use of repeated gestures and the fastidious manipulation of objects fraught with a symbolic dimension, as well as the sacrifice of animals, allow the dancer to enter a state of trance. The beating of drums, the spinning movements of the body achieving power, and the singing of tempos are Volume XIV Issue I Version I

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performance elements that establish communion with the forces of possession.

The continuous drum beating, associated with rhythmic movements, take the dancer, by forceful spasms, onto the way to recall, and call upon, the ancestors. The collective trance mood is heightened by spirit possession, a way to establish and recreate links with the dead. It marks a moment of transformation of the cult performer whereby he attempts to reach communion with divine power. It is spirit possession that produces a communal spiritual energy and thus exerts power over the group.

Through spirit possession, the dancer conjures spirits, revives the dead and recreates the realm of ancestors which, in a sense, is a re-enactment and revival of lost bonds. As such, the dance becomes a site of collective memory fraught with a psychic dimension; it is a moment of liberation from the wounds and traumas of the past. Fanon explains the liberating and purging force of the dance of possession in the following way: "the circle of the dance is a permissive circle [in which] may be deciphered as in an open book the huge effort of a community to exorcise itself, to liberate itself, to explain itself." (1965, 45) The inextricable link between ritual dance and its psychic dimension is apparent in the limbo dance which becomes an exercise where the traumas of the Middle Passage are relived and re-enacted. Wilson Harris's explanation of the power of the limbo is worth reiterating:

"A profound art of compensation which seeks to re-play a dismemberment of tribes and to invoke at the same time a curious psychic re-assembly of the parts of the dead god or dead gods. And that reassembly [...] is a creative phenomenon of the first importance in the imagination of a people violated by economic fates." (qtd in Pin-Chia Feng, 21)

Harris uses the limbo dance 4 4 The limbo dance involves two people standing with a stick between them, and a third person moving under the stick face upwards back bent without the knees touching the ground. The stick is lowered after each pass, and in some instances, the stick is lit a fire. The limbo displays the limberness of the dancer, the capacity to be supple and acrobatic, so the word limbo is tied to the word limber. The connection to the limbo of Catholicism–that place of being in between, is an intellectual extension that may be tied directly to the dance. Nonetheless, the immediate reference to the limbo is to the dance. In his poem "The Limbo", Brathwaite posits that the dance is a slave ship limbering dance used to make slaves stay fit while on the ships. He further argues that its re-enactment of slave society is a way to ritualise the journey across the Atlantic, the journey of burial (baptism) in the sea and resurrection on the other side, a narrative of the rite of passage from pain and struggle to survival. Wilson Harris refers to the folk dance and the further symbolic meaning of that dance.

to refer to the folk dance, replete with an enigmatic symbolic dimension. Indeed, the dancer creates, through corporal signs or body language, a temporal space calling upon the realm of ancestors. The limberness of the dancer is thus emblematic of the in-between state in which the unconscious and conscious overlap; hence the dance is an ecstatic moment of complete liberation. The symbolic dimension of the ritualistic dances is echoed in Brathwaite's insistence that it is a re-enactment of the journey of slaves and the traumatic experience of the Middle passage. It is in this sense that it can be read as a narrative of the rite of passage from pain to survival, where past and present overlap, on the way to redemption, a key step to envisage the future.

IV.

8 Conclusion

However, the spiral of inter-communal violence which sparks off by the end of the novel implies the double representation of Afro-Jamaican ritualistic practices as sites of empowerment and destruction. By Centring the narrative on rituals, Salkey suggests that Caribbean culture has its own validity and ethos. Yet, he points to the way violence, set within the framework of ritualistic practices, may result into chaos and the further disintegration of the community.

Collective acts of violence, such as the sacrificial death of both Dada Johnson and his deputy and the ritual death of Mother Johnson stoned to death by the crowd, serve to explore the fundamental violence of human nature and collective, irrational and spontaneous violence that may grow out of a sense of frustration and wretchedness, in the face of a particular social situation. This is the background against which Salkey criticises violence as a quality of life, a way to cope with the negative social conditions. The various deaths, resulting from violence, act as a warning against this form of non-organised and inward-directed violence.

Hence, the very representation of the tragic fate that has befallen the islanders is used in the narrative to re-imagine a 'community' where class unity and positive morality prevail. Salkey demonstrates that the challenge of the future therefore lies in the need to develop positive morality, a prerequisite for liberation from the tarnishing effects of colonialism, and the sole way to grapple with the uncertain power dynamics of the neocolonial condition. Salkey understands change in terms of the 'will to action' and the capacity and willingness of men to change their condition (Nazareth, 36).

By rendering the experience of the peasant class from within, through the focus on rituals, Salkey manages to make the West Indian novel a space in which the peasant, regain subjectivity and their capacity to speak. He thus paved the way for the examination of the politics of syncretic religion in an ambivalent and complex way. The region-specific depiction of the Jamaican experience of indoctrination and the sharp cultural conflict that typify the neo-colonial state of affairs somehow manages to transcend the region and come to represent the Caribbean experience as a whole.

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In a sense, this work establishes the ground for the forthcoming generation of writers and serves as a culmination for earlier attempts at craving a space for one's voice and building national identity.

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Figure 1:

Figure 2:

[1]For further reading, see: Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1965), Kamau Brathwaite, Roots (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993) and Wilson Harris, Tradition, the Writer and Society: Critical Essays

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