

## Form as a Site of Contest: Yoruba Tragedy turns Revolutionary in Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship*

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The search for an ethnic form, for a black theatre that was not white theatre in blackface, led Baraka and other artists during and after the Black Arts movement to experiment with integrating music and dance with the theatrical event. Many, such as Barbara Ann Teer and Paul Carter Harrison, sought to trace the African American music and dance to their African sources. Evolving a theatrical form using these aspects of the African American tradition offered a viable alternative to the dominant white Western forms.

Harrison's neo-African dramatic poetics exemplifies this orientation. Paul Carter Harrison, in *Kuntu Drama: Plays of the African Continuum*, suggests the models and analyses the structure of a fulfilling black theatre, which he names Kuntu drama. Kuntu is defined as signifying the "mode of image, or rather the cluster of elements that make up the context in which an image is formed." Identifying the Kuntu forces as those of "Song, Dance and Drum," he argues that "the souls of black folks" cannot be expressed through words alone, and that instead of a play, an event must be orchestrated to "capture the rhythms of that life, committing the community to a form of total engagement of body/ spirit" (Harrison 7). It is a field of experience blending various stage elements into a "fluid matrix" that creates a total experience and is not limited to the "scientific laws of cause and effect" (Harrison 10). Harrison's attempt is to break down the boundaries between the various stage elements, to blend them into a fluid medium in order to transcend the fixity in the representations of time and space, body and spirit, social and moral issues. Within the dramatic matrix, use of elements such as mask, character transformations, play with light and shadow, song, dance and drum help create new relationships in the field of experience, and restore "a sense of harmony to the community" (Harrison 8). The other crucial aspect of Harrison's Kuntu drama is the synthesis of audience and participators. The integrating, synthesizing force of this theater is to be employed to create a communal experience. Harrison takes the black church as the model for the kind of communion anticipated from the theatrical event. It is expected to be a secular-spiritual event that not only binds body with spirit but also integrates the actors with the audience, who are assigned the crucial role of "authenticating--or deauthenticating" the experience. The theater, thus, is envisioned as an important instrument in creating/ recreating the black community. Harrison chose *Great Goodness of Life* from Baraka's canon for his collection *Kuntu Drama*, but he spoke very highly of *Slave Ship* as being "indicative of the ends" of Kuntu drama (Harrison 8). It would be instructive to examine *Slave Ship* for Baraka's experimentation with dramatic elements and to see how these artistic innovations are bound up with the realization of the black nationalistic goals.

*Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* (1967) is one of Baraka's most powerful plays in which he brings elements from the Yoruba tragedy into a defiant

conjunction with his own vision of a revolutionary theater. The play is structured as a series of tableaux, which trace the history of the African Americans since their first boarding of the slave ship, recreating the unrelieved horrors and sufferings in their lives. The world of the play is one of filth, horror and degradation, created by an accumulation of physical stimuli that are meant to invade the senses of the actors and the audience alike. The slave ship becomes the symbol of the African American historical condition. The play finally shows the triumphant victory of African Americans over the oppressive power, but suggests that African Americans will continue to be on a slave ship until they break out of this prison of history by revolutionary action.

*Slave Ship* is visualized as an event, a performance which creates an enveloping effect using light and darkness, sounds and smells, speech and silence. Speech and words are not privileged over the other sensory theatrical elements, and are often used as mere sounds. Sound is employed in a multiplicity of ways, including chants, screams, laughter, crying, sounds of the sea, sounds of the moving ship, gun shots, rattle of chains, whip sounds, drums, rattles, tambourines, music and singing. There are smell effects, of incense, of "dirt/ filth smell/ bodies," stifling smells of "Pee. Shit. Death," and odours of the sea (Baraka 132).<sup>1</sup> Tactile effects, of "slash and tear of the lash," dragging of chains, of people pushed together, are created through sounds and variation of light and darkness. All these elements together create a pervasive and oppressive effect, or what Baraka calls "a total atmosfeeling," which is meant to envelop the audience as much as the actors (132). The play uses extensive and graphic stage directions to create the sensory experience for the readers. The characters include three men and three women (without names), who play the African Slaves; Tom, who is first the slave and then the preacher; white Captain and white Sailor, who transform into Plantation Owners; and Dancers, Musicians and Children. The opening scene creates the heavy, oppressive atmosphere of the slave ship. In the first line of the play a reference to the ship full of captured Africans as a "cargo of black gold" establishes their status as dehumanised commodities (133). However, the objectification of these people is offset by the audience being surrounded, in darkness and dim lights, by the sounds and smells of their agony and suffering. Men cry out to their gods, children scream, and women wail. The incessant moaning of the slave women becomes the symbolic representation of the life of the black people, while the whites are defined by their hideous laughter. White men in sailor suits point at the scene of human degradation before them and laugh and roll in merriment. The blacks begin to turn against each other and kill themselves in their suffering. The first tableau in this pageant thus establishes the pain, the terror and the confusion of men, women, and children when they find themselves brutally herded into the slave ship.

The next image shows the slaves on the plantation. While there is continuity with the African past in the old Yoruba dances and in the drums of ancient African warriors, debasement and betrayal of the community has already begun with some of the slaves shuffling and dancing, "agreeing with massa, agreeing, and agreeing, while the whips snap"(137). The white sailors have, with a change of the hat, transformed into the plantation owners and

they continue to point and laugh. A representative scene is enacted in which Tom, the shuffling slave, betrays Reverend Turner's plan for a rebellion in exchange for the reward of a pork chop from the white master. The rebellion is crushed and the whites are again laughing in triumph. Meanwhile, the black people have changed their names for English slave names, and are heard singing the Spirituals and praying to Jesus. This emergence of African American identity, however, does not negate their African origin as they continue to pray to African gods, "Obatala . . . Shango . . . Lord of the forests," to get their strength back (141).

The play moves into a more recent period in history and we see Tom, who is the same Tom as before, now dressed as a preacher in a modern business suit. He talks gibberish, a "pseudo-intellectual patter," as he assures the white man that blacks want integration and promise to be non-violent: "We Kneegrows are ready to integrate." A black man sets a wrapped-up bloody corpse of a baby in front of Tom, who tries to push the baby's body out of the sight of the white master (142). This bleak vision of the degradation of some members of the black community is dispelled by the resisting will of the other blacks, symbolised by the "high hard sound of saxophone." The sound of drums, symbol of their old strength, is joined by the "New-sound saxophone." Out of the cacophony of the sounds of the slave ship, saxophone, drums, and pervasive white laughter, there rises a chant of "Rise, Rise, Rise/ Cut these ties, Black Man Rise," an expression of the rising determination of the black community to overcome its history of oppression (143). The chant intensifies and culminates in the liberating moments when Tom the preacher and the white "Voice" are killed. At the end there is dancing to the music of "Rise up," and Baraka's stage direction instructs that the audience should be made to join this ritualistic dance, and when the celebration picks up, somebody should throw the preacher's head into the centre of floor. This is followed by the stage direction "Then black." The play concludes at this high point of arousal of the audience when the boundary between the dramatic and the social text is anticipated as crumbling. The end raises critical questions about the goals and techniques of Baraka's revolutionary drama, to which I shall return a little later.

In this play, Baraka envisions the African American community as the protagonist. The individual is seen as the prototypical representative of the community and the play focuses on the broad outlines and the palpable details of horror in the African American history. Collectivity is not only the essential aspect of African American history, which began with the captives being herded and pushed together on the slave ship, but is also envisioned as the only possibility of release from the history of slavery and oppression.

The historicity of the play is a complex mix of ideas of continuity and stasis, of belonging and becoming. There is a powerful evocation of the African origin of the slaves, and their African-ness is kept alive throughout the play by Yoruba dance and music, the sounds of the drums, and the prayers to the Yoruba gods. Claiming this connection with their African origins is an important part of the historical project of the play. The continuity of the suffering of the black people, however, presents a static view of the history of African Americans, as it portrays them still on the

slave ship. Baraka significantly omits any reference to the emancipation of the slaves in order to reinforce the unchanging condition of African Americans. The various tableaux in this pageant replicate the story of their repression, and thus reveal their history in America to be cyclical. While it is crucial for the community to develop the historical consciousness, the play envisions the transcendence of this prison of history by sudden, apocalyptic action. The play sets up an opposition between white and black, between African slaves and White people. The blacks in the play are either referred to as African warriors, or as slaves and “niggers.” The viability of a hyphenated identity is implicitly and completely rejected. The search for an integrated community identity underlies the unambiguous rejection of the white world and the assertion of African origin. This connection is also expressed through the form of the play, which incorporates some of the central ideas of Yoruba tragedy.

The basic conceptions and structure of *Slave Ship* are illuminated if one looks at the description of Yoruba tragedy as explained by Wole Soyinka in his essay “The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy” (Soyinka 27-39). The frame of Yoruba tragedy, according to Soyinka, is the transitional stage between death and becoming, the severance of essence from self. Ogun, the god of iron, war and craftsmanship, was the first to plunge into this inchoate abyss, thus becoming the first tragic actor. Soyinka explains the Yoruba tragedy in terms of the concept of four stages. He explains it thus:

The past is the ancestors’, the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn. The deities stand in the same situation to the living as do the ancestors and the unborn, obeying the same laws, suffering the same agonies and uncertainties, employing the same masonic intelligence of rituals for the perilous lunge into the fourth area of experience, the immeasurable gulf of transition. Its dialogue is liturgy, its music takes from man’s uncomprehending immersion in this area of existence, buried wholly from rational recognition. The source of the possessed lyricist, chanting hitherto unknown mythopoeic strains whose antiphonal refrain is, however, instantly caught and thrust with all its terror and awesomeness into the night by swaying votaries, this source is residual in the numinous area of transition.

This is the fourth stage, the vortex of archetypes and home of the early tragic spirit. (Soyinka 32)

The fourth stage, the stage of transition is described as a metaphysical abyss, faced with which both man and gods tremble. The only thing that can save the protagonist from this abyss is a “titanic resolution of the will.” Music is the emanation of this will when the human being is faced with the gulf and threatened with the dissolution of the self. All tragedy, in Soyinka’s account, is the re-creation of this primal “battle of the will through the abyss of dissolution” (Soyinka 32). And all music is “the stricken cry of man’s blind soul as he flounders in the void and crashes through a deep abyss of aspirituality and cosmic rejection” (Soyinka 30).

Baraka’s play, viewed in the light of this conception, begins to acquire the dimensions of a Yoruba tragedy. The passage from Africa to America,

from freedom into slavery can be seen as the “fourth stage” described by Soyinka, the zone of transition, and the gulf of the dissolution of the self, the abyss where tragedy is born. Soyinka describes the traditional Yoruba tragedy as the “anguish of severance, the fragmentation of essence from self” (Soyinka 30). In Baraka’s play this severance is visualized as the physical severance and deportation of African people from their rooted community life. The beginning of the play shows the black men, women and children at the moment when they find themselves inexplicably thrown into the abyss of the slave ship. The first reactions are the moans and the primal scream, as all the women scream “the hideous scream.” Finding themselves in the dark, surrounded by filth and smell, these people are frightened, angry and confused. There is the sense of abandonment and cosmic rejection as the captives moan, “Where are we, God?” and call out to their gods, Ohatala, Shango, Orisha<sup>2</sup> (133). The women begin to chant the “African Sorrow Song,” with the rattle of chains for accompaniment. The long years, indeed centuries, of slavery are very imaginatively captured by Baraka in a long moan. The stage direction powerfully describes it thus: “Drums beat down, softer . . . humming starts . . . hummmmmmm, hummmmmmmmm, like old black women humming for three centuries in the slow misery of slavery,” and this is followed by a much longer moan. This music is the expression of their spiritual being when faced with the abyss of suffering, and it attempts, to use Soyinka’s words, to “tap the tragic source whence spring the familiar weird disruptive melodies” (Soyinka 31).

Soyinka’s description of the Yoruba tragedy also asserts Ogun’s, and hence the human being’s, power to struggle and triumph over the threat of disintegration through the agency of the “will.” When the tragic protagonist is crushed and broken by disasters and troubles, this “will” is kept alive in the transitional memory which reminds the tragic protagonist of the first battle through the gulf, that of Ogun. In *Slave Ship*, this “will” asserts itself, and is kept alive through the centuries, in the continuous acts of slave rebellion and resistance in the black history. Music and dance function as the embodiments of this determination. The tragic “will” manifests itself early when the people find themselves huddled together at the bottom of the boat, and their “different wills” are “articulated as screams, grunts, cries, songs” (134). Gradually there are other expressions, such as “Black dancing in the dark, with bells, as if free, dancing wild old dances” (137). But the pervasive effect is of continuous, unending misery. Oppression, chains, filth, misery, degradation, death, disease, separation, blacks turning against blacks, betrayal for limited self-interest, uprisings being crushed: these mark their existence. Woven through these experiences, however, is the constant strain of music: the moans, the screams, the old drums, the new saxophone, the chants, the spirituals, and this music, as Soyinka says, is the “ritual summons, response, and expression” of “the titanic resolution of the will.” The characters appeal to Ogun to come to their aid. The “fetish” object associated with Ogun was iron, the symbol of his power. In *Slave Ship* Man 1 appeals to Ogun for weapons and iron. Baraka’s play envisions the African American community as the protagonist braving the abyss, making the tragic journey, and overcoming not only the external onslaughts but also the betrayal and divisions within the community.

The conclusion of the play envisions a triumphant end to this tragic journey, as the people sing "Rise, Rise, Rise," and after killing both White Voice and Black Preacher, engage in a triumphal dance. Here the play seems to depart from the spirit of the Yoruba tragedy as outlined by Soyinka. The emphasis in Soyinka's account of the tragic spirit is on the ritual anguish and not on its transcendence: "To dare the transition is the ultimate test of the human spirit, and Ogun is the first protagonist of the abyss" (37). At the end of *Slave Ship*, Baraka appears to move out of the tragic frame to execute the avowed goals of his revolutionary drama. This transposition makes the final statement of the play very complex.

The conclusion of the play, as suggested earlier, is dense and requires careful examination. This end remains problematic because it enacts an unproblematic transition from the mythic plane to the social-realistic plane, and translates tragic action into revolutionary action. The last scene of the play, in which the audience is asked to participate, brings into focus several issues central to the structure of the play. In a way, the play is open-ended since its conclusion remains consequent upon audience participation in the sacrificial ritual. After the preacher has been killed, the stage direction reads: "Lights come up abruptly, and people on stage begin to dance . . . . Enter audience; get members of audience to dance. To same music Rise Up. Turns into an actual party" (145). The shift from "people on stage" to "actual party," from the theatrical event to the social context is central to the intent of this play. It seeks to close the gap between the "art" and "the life" of African American people in the context of contemporary social action, and also use it as a means of reclaiming a mythic past by the ritualistic act of sacrifice. The end gestures towards a fusion of the revolutionary and the ritualistic goals of Baraka's theatre. The cycle of history will be broken only when the divide between the audience and actors is removed, and the insights of the play are carried over to the community. In his essay, "Revolutionary Theater," Baraka says, "What we show must cause the blood to rush, so that pre-revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught" (Jones 213). The climax departs from Aristotle's notion of catharsis in the way it deals with the emotion that has been generated through the course of the play. The emotions are not to be purged, but sustained for generating change: "We will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony, if it means some soul will be moved, moved to actual understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be" (Jones 213). In *Slave Ship*, the audience is expected to participate in the collectivity of the ritualistic dance at the end. This underscores the transference of the action from the dramatic to the social world, and emphasizes the communal nature of the action envisaged by Harrison and Baraka himself. The celebration at the end takes us back to the origins of drama in sacrificial rituals. The sacrifices of the black Preacher and the white Voice are seen as propitiatory acts, which start the healing process for the black community. As Benston interprets it, the cannibalistic rite at the end is apocalyptic, completing the "absorption of the natural, historical cycle into mythology" and thus bringing the original sense of wholeness and identity to the

community (Benston 254). In spite of Benston's neat explanation, the end, however, remains disturbing and ambiguous. The closing stage direction of the play reads as follows: "When the party [which includes members of the audience] reaches some loose improvisation, et cetera, audience relaxed, somebody throws the preacher's head into center of floor, that is, after dancing starts for real. Then Black" (145). There is an attempt here to dissolve the difference between the mythical and historical planes of black history in the symbolic action of the ritualistic sacrifice, and then, in one swift move transpose the symbolic action into a real, socially directed, revolutionary action. What is disturbing in this structure is the simultaneous presence of at least three realms of reference: the historical, the mythical, and the contemporary. The concluding ritual ties up the historical and the mythical levels of reality, but what remains unexamined and unexplained in the play is the way in which the cannibalistic ritual can provide direction for dealing with a world highly dichotomized and polarized between black and white. The participation of the audience in the dance at the end suggests an interface between the theatrical event and social reality. Baraka's positioning of the "sacrifice" at this juncture brings out the immediacy, the power and the ambiguity in the mixing of the social and dramatic texts. The end of the play thus remains an "event" disturbingly poised between lived experience and symbolic representation.

Baraka transposes the basic conceptions of Yoruba tragedy onto the contemporary African American situation that in his conception requires direct, revolutionary action. He has also moved the theatrical form closer to life. Rather than merely being a representation of external reality, art attempts to mediate in it. Structurally, he experiments radically by bringing varied elements into conjunction. In adapting the African Yoruba form to his ideas of African American identity and history, Baraka attempts to claim his African origins both through form and content. The density of Baraka's formal experimentation in *Slave Ship* comes from the fact that impelled by the disparate and multiple needs of being an African American writer, he uses the form as a site of contest.

## <sup>1</sup>Notes

All references to *Slave Ship* are from Amiri Baraka, *The Motion of History and Other Plays* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1978), and the page numbers are given in parenthesis.

<sup>2</sup> Ohatala is the Yoruba god of purity and creation, Shango the god of thunder and lightening, and Orisha is the supreme deity in the Yoruba pantheon.

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