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African Languages in Baraka, Brathwaite and Nascimento: from Loss to Possession

Résumé

Les poètes Amiri Baraka, Kamau Brathwaite et Abdias do Nascimento, tous trois poétiquement actifs durant les années 1960 et 1970, ont travaillé à l'élaboration d'une utopie poétique, celle d'une reconnexion culturelle et linguistique avec l'Afrique. La langue de l'Autre africain, présenté comme un Autre intérieur, cristallise notamment les aspirations à un retour aux cultures perdues. Le choix de la langue africaine qui viendra s'inviter dans le texte en anglais ou en portugais revêt alors un aspect symbolique : l'akan, pour Brathwaite, devient comme un masque qu'il revêt lors de son séjour au Ghana pour être habité à nouveau par les ancêtres africains ; le swahili, pour Baraka, est l'emblème d'un afrocentrisme conquérant influencé par la philosophie de Maulana Karenga ; le yoruba enfin est pour Nascimento cette matrice dynamique qui se manifeste dans les mots du candomblé brésilien, signalant une continuité culturelle enfouie. Cet article se penche sur les différentes stratégies poétiques mises en place par chacun de ces poètes pour accomplir poétiquement l'utopie d'une reconnexion linguistique.

Abstract

Poets Amiri Baraka, Kamau Brathwaite and Abdias do Nascimento, all poetically active during the 1960s and 1970s, have attempted to create a poetic utopia, that of a cultural and linguistic reconnection with Africa. The language of the African "Other", presented as an Inner Other, crystallizes their aspirations to return to lost cultures. The choice of an African language inserted in the English or Portuguese text therefore holds a symbolic significance: for Brathwaite, Akan is akin to a mask he wore during his stay in Ghana in order to become possessed again by his African ancestors; for Baraka, Swahili is the emblem of a strong-willed Afrocentrism influenced by the philosophy of Maulana Karenga; for Nascimento, finally, Yoruba is a dynamic matrix which manifests itself in the words of Brazilian *candomblé* – a sign of a subterranean cultural continuity. This article looks at the respective poetic strategies developed by these poets in order to accomplish poetically the utopia of linguistic reconnection.

Mots-clefs

Poésie de la diaspora africaine – Langues africaines – Multilinguisme – Reconnexion

Key words

African Diasporic poetry – African languages – Multilingualism – Reconnection

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African Languages in Baraka, Brathwaite and Nascimento: from Loss to Possession

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The possibilities opened up by the adoption of multilingualism in poetic writing are virtually as profuse and unpredictable as those held by poetry itself. Far from being a mere gimmick associated with one particular literary movement (such as Pound and Eliot's modernism), multilingualism is one of several techniques poets can use to elaborate their poetics, with specific aims and aesthetic nuances. "The use of several or many languages" – to use the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition[1] - lends itself particularly well to the renewal of the reader's vision, an effect often attributed to poetry since the Romantic era and famously expressed by Shelley's formula on how the poet's work "makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar".[2]

As a matter of fact, multilingualism in a poem may destabilize the perceptual habits of its readers by putting them face to face with the accidental characteristics of their culture, and ultimately, their identity. All writers work with languages not only as communicational tools but also as "as a strand in the larger fabric, as part of a broad concern with identity and belonging".[3] The language readers share with the poetic voice, which is also (to various extents) what connects them to one particular socio-historical place and time, is confronted with its "other", forcing them to perceive more intensely their own words and the collective representations that underpin them. Language is something we master, allowing us to read literature; in multilingual writing, we may discover ourselves to be, at the same time, mastered by one particular language. The familiar, the unquestioned can indeed be de-familiarized by this experience of linguistic plurality.

Furthermore, the very perception of multilingualism involves a series of unconscious collective decisions regarding language and society. What we think of when we talk about a language in a countable, pluralizable sense, as opposed to language as a general faculty, is "a system of human communication using words, written and spoken, and particular ways of combining them; any such system employed by a community, a nation, etc."[4] Clearly, the key concepts upon which the definition of multilingualism rests ("community", "nation") are far from universal and unconditionally agreed upon. Where does multilingualism objectively begin? Where do we draw the limit? Languages are not insular, self-reliant systems; all are characterized by an inner plurality, with foreign influences, dialects and sociolects, or multiple phenomena of hybridity and linguistic creolization. Jan Blommaert has attributed the idea of "language as a bounded, nameable, and countable unit, often reduced to grammatical structures and vocabulary and called by names such as 'English', 'French' and so on", which he also calls the "artefactualized image

[1] *Oxford English Dictionary, On Historical Principles,* Oxford, Oxford UP, 2007, p. 1863.
[2] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*, Oxford; Ginn & co., 1890, p. 13.
[3] Edwards, J.R. "Multiculturalism and Language", *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 2nd edition, vol. 8, dir. Keith Brown, Oxford, Elsevier, 2006, p. 370.
[4] *Oxford English Dictionary, op. cit.* p. 1544.

of language", to the theoretical influence of Saussurean synchrony[5] associated with an ideological "imagination of monolingualism and social uniformity".[6] Linguists in the past have created "simulacra of lived language in order to be able to study it"[7], simulacra that should not be confused with language itself at the risk of seeing it as a fixed, abstract entity that exists outside of time and space.

Strictly speaking, multilingualism in a given text exists to the extent that it is perceived as such. Its perception, one could say, is conditioned by the forgetfulness of the inner otherness of languages. For instance the play on Arabic/French bilingualism in works by Moroccan author Amran El Maleh relies on the perception of a distance, a difference[8]; the countless French words that come from Arabic (and vice versa) are irrelevant, if not counterproductive, in such plays with otherness.[9] Even when a writer wants to make a point about the hybridity or interpenetration of languages, he/she has to do it through a play on the reader's perception of differences; and this perception is necessarily localized in one particular cultural/linguistic place and time, itself conditioned by the absorption of the otherness of words and expressions that have stopped being perceived as foreign. Literary writing concurrently manipulates languages and "linguistic ideologies", in the sense of "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use."[10] A poetics of multilingualism therefore entails a work on strangeness and readability, that may have strong political implications regarding the definitions of group limits and linguistic ideologies. It plays on language at two levels simultaneously: language as it really is, as it is used and perceived in the actual poetic exchange; and language as something in becoming, as a reservoir of possible reinventions of itself made possible by the "estrangement" process at work in poetic reading.

This complex intertwining of multilingualism with evolving views and discourses on the frontiers between groups takes a specific dimension in the works of Abdias do Nascimento (1914-2011), Kamau Brathwaite (b. 1930), and Amiri Baraka (b. 1934). For these three poets of African descent, the questioning and refashioning of group identities is, rightly, what is at play in the very gesture of writing poetry. Building from our initial remarks on poetry and multilingualism, this paper will look at the way these Brazilian, Barbadian and American writers use words belonging to African languages in their works. We will focus particularly on three collections where these multilingual experimentations are salient poetic features: Brathwaite's *Masks* (1968), Baraka's *It's Nation Time* (1970) and Nascimento's *Axés do sangue e da esperança* (1983), which feature Akan, Swahili and Yoruba words respectively. In contrasting ways and through equally distinct means, these three poets marked by the Black and Pan-African movements of the 1960s and 1970s use these terms from the "Motherland" to articulate their present to a collective past marked by an initial dispossession.

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[5] Jan Blommaert. *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2010, p. 4.

[6] J. Blommaert. *ibid.*, p. 26.

[7] J. Blommaert. "Narrative, interaction, or both", *Discourse Studies* 9/6 (2007), p. 828.

[8] For examples see Marc Gontard, "Qu'est-ce qu'une littérature arabe francophone? L'exemple du Maghreb." *La Francophonie arabe: pour une approche de la littérature arabe francophone*, dir. Abdallah Ouali Alami & Colette Martini-Valat. Toulouse, P U du Mirail, 2005, p. 37-47.

[9] See Henriette Walter & Bassam Baraké, *Arabesques, L'Aventure de la langue arabe en Occident*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2006.

[10] Michael Silverstein, "Language Structure and Linguistic Ideology", *The Elements*, dir. P. Clyne, W. Hanks & C. Hofbauer, Chicago, Chicago Linguistic Society, 1979, p. 193.

Mother Tongues Torn Off

In her 2007 book of the same name, Saidiya Hartmann proposes the formula "lose your mother" to encapsulate the experience of being the descendant of people taken to America as slaves. She suggests that being an African American is being forced constantly to acknowledge "the loss that inaugurates one's existence. It is to be bound to other promises. It is to lose your mother, always."[11] The inaugural loss of the cultural ties with Africa paradoxically provides the diasporic subject with another type of "bond": one that links her/him with the multiple "promises" of re-imagined histories and "Motherlands".

"Losing your mother" is also losing your mother tongue. The writings of Baraka, Brathwaite and Nascimento all bear witness to the collective trauma of linguistic dispossession. In "Prece a Oxum" ["Prayer to Oshum"], a piece Nascimento wrote while in Oshogbo (Nigeria) in 1976, the speaker addresses the eponymous Yoruba river-deity to beg for a reconnection with the ancestral land; but words initially seem to fail him:

> Como posso Oxum continuar
> se até a lingua me arrancaram ?
> imploro ajuda a Exu dono da palavra
> laroiê
> minha fala agora vou soltar
>
> [How can I continue O Oshum
> if even my tongue they tore off?
> I beg for the help of Eshu, the Master of words
> *laroiê*
> I will now let my speech flow [12]]

The call to Eshu, the Yoruba messenger-deity, signals the lyric subject's longing for his long-lost African tongue. Eshu is presented as a "Master of words", and the verse in which he is summoned is immediately followed by a word ("laroiê") that cannot fail to trigger a feeling of strangeness for a standard Portuguese speaker. It is, indeed, the Portuguese spelling of the Yoruba exclamation "làáróyè", a ritual salutation used in Yoruba celebrations when addressing Eshu in particular.[13] The sudden appearance of this word that embodies the idea of a linguistic link to Africa is evidence of Eshu's verbal power, and a response to the violent physiological image brought about by the use of the verb "arrancar" ("to tear off"), which reactivates the anatomical meaning of "lingua" ("tongue") while keeping its linguistic sense. Here the collective experience of Afro-Brazilians (having lost their African languages) meets the individual feeling of the poet, who wrote these verses in the heart of the Nigerian "Yorubaland" but only speaks Brazilian Portuguese as a result of what he has harshly termed a cultural "genocide" of African cultures in Brazil.[14]

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[11] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother : A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, NY, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007, p. 100.

[12] Abdias do Nascimento, *Axés do sangue e da esperança*. Rio de Janeiro, Achiamé, 1983, p. 36. Translations are ours unless otherwise noted.

[13] Yeda Pessoa de Castro, *Falares Africanos na Bahia. Um Vocabulário Afro-Brasileiro,* Rio de Janeiro, Academia Brasileira de Letras, 2005, p. 263.

[14] A. Nascimento¸ *O Genocidio do Negro Brasileiro: Processo de um racismo Mascarado*, Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra, 1978.

Likewise, Caribbean bard Kamau Brathwaite has made clear that he wrote "to interpret or reconnect [African survivals in the Caribbean] with the great tradition of Africa."[15] His poetry is haunted by a sense of cultural loss, the diasporic subject appearing as a silenced, "dumb" wanderer whose "tongue is heavy with new language / but [who] cannot give birth speech"[16], whose "trapped curled tongue still cries."[17] Brathwaite's account of cultural dispossession also takes a linguistic dimension when the speaker of *Masks* is shown landing in Takoradi, in the Southwest of modern-day Ghana – an unequivocal reflection of the poet's real-life trip in 1955:

> *Akwaaba* they smiled
> meaning welcome
>
> *akwaaba* they called
> *aye kooo*
>
> well have you walked
> have you journeyed
>
> welcome
>
> you who have come
> back a stranger
> after three hundred years [...]
>
> do
> you remember?[18]

In this piece, the words of the Akan language are used to convey the ambivalent feeling of estrangement/recognition of the diasporic subject when visiting the continent of his ancestors. The words "akwaaba" ("welcome") and "aye kooo" ("well done"[19]) are not translated, not even in the otherwise complete glossary appended to the 1973 Oxford University Press edition. The strangeness of these words is stressed by the use of the italics, which clearly sets them apart from the words in English, the language shared with the implied reader. This experimentation with multilingualism is paired up with a polyphonic enunciation. The Akan words appear to be uttered by a collective speaker ("they"), the embodiment of a community which contrasts with the isolation of the main speaker and protagonist, who "come[s] back / a stranger" in the land of his forefathers. The unitalicized words comprise the *inquit* formulae characteristic of direct speech ("they smiled", "they called") as well as what could be interpreted as the English translations of Akan words present in the text ("akwaaba") or not. But the polyphony of this passage remains quite ambiguous: if the fact of saying "welcome" to a foreign visitor appears quite conventional, the idea of Akan speakers greeting a traveler with the phrase "aye kooo" is more puzzling. What is this welcoming committee congratulating the protagonist for? And why, after that, do they seem to know all about his quest for identity, and keep asking him in an insistent

[15] Kamau Brathwaite, *Roots*, Ann Arbor, U of Michigan P, 1993, p. 212.
[16] K. Brathwaite, *The Arrivants*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1973, p. 221.
[17] K. Brathwaite. *ibid.*, p. 148.
[18] K. Brathwaite. *ibid.*, p. 124.
[19] *English-Tshi (Asante). A Dictionary,* Basel Missionary Society, Basel, 1909, p. 214.

fashion if he "remembers"? Clearly here, the otherness of the semi-translated Akan language points towards a polyphonic exchange happening within the conscience of the speaker, conveying more than anything else his own perception of the Akan language as a "promise" (to use Hartman's word) – or, to use a term present in the poem itself, a "call" - for a reinvention of the self.

At the height of the Black Arts Movement and later, Amiri Baraka shared the same premise as Nascimento and Brathwaite. He claimed that the role of the Black artist in America was "to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it", adding that "[t]he Black Artist must draw out of his soul the correct image of the world. He must use this image to band his brothers and sisters together".[20] This nationalist stance led him to sternly denounce the cultural assimilation of African Americans to Western values, including in the linguistic domain. In *Wise/Why's/Y's*, his epic poem about what he significantly calls "African American (American) History"[21], Baraka places his first verses under the sign of linguistic dispossession, described as a foundational experience: the African slave is depicted as "lost and surrounded / by enemies / who won't let [him] / speak [his] own language".[22] The History of Black Americans is then narrated as that of a progressive reconnection with this stolen heritage through political enlightenment and cultural practices – especially music. The practice of scat in particular, with its purely phonic utterances, is akin to an *in absentia* appearance of the lost tongues: "scat / is / African / American Bloods / Speaking still / pure African".[23] And in a later, more theoretical text: "The scat is the cultural memory of African languages, so essential in its fundamental powering of the music (Black Speech!) that it demonstrates it exists without and before American lyrics."[24]

In the specific contexts of American, Barbadian and Brazilian literatures, each of these three Pan-African poets has committed to the mission of reconnecting the Black diasporic experience with that of Africa, despite being forced to do so in a language inherited from the European powers involved in the transatlantic slave trade. Their common aim is then to symbolically break away from a constituted national or imperial community (which includes a constituted literary tradition) through the poetic use of language and languages. What role could the actual languages spoken in Africa play in that enterprise of poetic self-othering?

Poetic Encounters

One element characteristic of the way poets look at the world is their ability to consider things from the perspective of what they could bring to their art. When Goethe discovered the *ghazals* of Persian poet Hafez, he did not see solely these poems for themselves, but also as possible inspirations for his own works – a first step towards the creation of his orientalist *West-östlicher Divan*. The same thing could be said about, say, Allen Ginsberg's encounter with Buddhism. In all these cases, the actual encounter of the

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[20] Amiri Baraka, "State/meant", *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, dir. William Harris, Berkeley, Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991, p. 169.
[21] A. Baraka, *Wise Why's Y's*, Chicago, Third World Press, 1995, p. 3.
[22] A. Baraka, *ibid.*, p. 7.
[23] A. Baraka, *ibid.*, p. 98.
[24] A. Baraka, *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music*, Berkeley, U of California P, 2010, p. 227.

individual with a cultural reality is doubled with a poetic encounter – a mode of relating to things tended towards the ongoing elaboration of a poetics.

The multilingual experimentations of Nascimento, Brathwaite and Baraka with African languages can only be explained convincingly if we keep this idea in mind. Even if all three poets do have African ancestry, there is no factual, anthropological justification for them to have elected Yoruba, Akan and Swahili respectively. A large proportion of the slaves taken to Barbados did speak an Akan language[25]; but others spoke a number of different tongues including Igbo and Yoruba. It is clearly a poetic decision on Brathwaite's part to "make the Akan people here representative of all the ancestral tribes of the African descendants in the Caribbean", as Warner-Lewis phrased it.[26] The same goes for Nascimento with regards to Yoruba. Even more puzzling for someone looking for a literal, linear ancestral link between the poets and the African languages they resort to is the case of Baraka, since Swahili was categorically not among the languages spoken by slaves taken to the Americas. The poetic/linguistic reconnection with Africa these writers attempt to carry out are symbolic gestures rooted in personal, incidental encounters with these languages.

Amiri Baraka's works produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s are marked by a radical form of cultural nationalism which may at times make them difficult to deal with in present days. In *It's Nation Time,* the search for a newfound unity and pride of African American people is expressed through an admittedly puzzling blend of political rants and mystical invocations:

> Ommmm Mane Padme Hummmmmmm
> Ooshoobee doo bee
> Ashadu an la Illaha Illaha
> Ooshoobee doo bee
> Tuna Jaribu Kuwa Weusi Tu
> Ooshoobee doo bee [...]
>
> (1) DIVINE
> is name we give you
> (2) GRACE
> is name we give you
> (3) MESSENGER
> we call you
> (4) PROPHET
> we call you
> (5) NOBLE BLACK MAN
> (6) PROFESSOR
> of Wisdomic Faith
> (7) MAULANA, father of the new dispensation
> Your growth is our own
>
> Sifa ote mtu weusi (repeat)[27]

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[25] Maureen Warner-Lewis, "Odomankoma Kyerema Se". *Caribbean Quarterly* 19/2 (June 1973), p. 51.
[26] M. Warner-Lewis, *ibid.,* p. 51.
[27] A. Baraka, *It's Nation Time,* Chicago, Third World Press, 1970, p. 19-20.

Along with its almost Poundian eclecticism, one of the most striking features of this section entitled "Sermon for Our Maturity" is its almost cult-like dimension. The use of Swahili phrases ("Tuna Jaribu Kuwa Weusi Tu", "Sifa ote mtu weusi") is in fact the direct result of Baraka's encounter with Maulana Karenga (born Ronald Everett), a Pan-African thinker and leader whose spirituality-infused movement indeed possessed some cult-like characteristics, as Baraka later acknowledged.[28] The end of this poem, where his name features, is reminiscent of a cult of personality. The poet was approached by Karenga in 1966, shortly after he moved back to Newark. He was so impressed by the man's confidence that he "assimilated the Kawaida doctrine and began pushing it wherever [he] went."[29] Kawaida is the name Karenga gave to his philosophy, which he based upon his knowledge of pre-colonial African cultures. Karenga advocated that African Americans study Swahili to reconnect with their African roots.[30] To his detractors, he replied that "Swahili is no more irrelevant to Blacks than Hebrew or Armenian is to Jews or Armenians who were not born in Israel or Armenia and will never go there".[31] He regarded this East-African language, which he had learnt at the University of California[32], as the international language of Africans, and envisioned a future in which all Africans would use it.[33] Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, had for a long time played the role of an African model for African American radicals; after he was overthrown in 1966, "Tanzania replaced Ghana as the primary site of Afro-American romanticization of Africa"[34], as Jerry Watts put it, and its president and language became increasingly popular amidst Pan-African ideologists in the United States.

It is unclear how much Swahili Baraka actually spoke, but the writer's autobiography does mention that he "learned the basic Swahili vocabulary"[35], making it doubtful - to say the least - that he and Karenga might have held "a thirty minutes conversation entirely in Swahili" during a Black Power conference in 1968.[36] The Swahili phrases used in his poetry are ready-made formulae he acquired during his time as a Kawaida enthusiast. "Sifa ote mtu weusi" means "Glory to the Black Man", and was a popular slogan used among Karenga followers, and which could often be heard at Baraka's "Spirit House" theatre in Newark during political or theatrical workshops.[37] He even had "students" of his reciting this phrase in order to promote a feeling of empowerment and Blackness.[38] The same use of this phrase is to be found in the above poem, where we are invited to "repeat" the phrase at the end of the seven steps prayer (another reference to Kawaida). The other Swahili phrase quoted in the excerpt is "Tuna Jaribu Kuwa Weusi Tu", which means "We are trying to become only Black", belongs to the same sort of

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[28] "What he had created was a cultural nationalist organization that had aspects of, and indeed became, a *cult*. [italics in the original]" A. Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*, Chicago, Lawrence Hill, 1997, p. 357.

[29] A. Baraka, *ibid.,* p. 359.

[30] Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 1999, p. 72.

[31] Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, Los Angeles, University of Sankore Press, 1993, p. 15.

[32] K. Woodard. *op. cit.*, p. 71.

[33] Adisa Alkebulan, "Kiswahili Movement", *Encyclopedia of Black Studies*, dir. Molefi Kete Asante & Ama Mazama, New York, SAGE, 2005, p. 298.

[34] Jerry Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*, NY, NYU Press, 2001, p. 393.

[35] A. Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones, op. cit.*, p. 386.

[36] J. Watts. *op. cit.*, p. 393.

[37] J. Watts. *ibid.*, p. 522.

[38] A. Baraka, "Black Woman", *Black World* (July 1970), p. 9.

phraseology.[39] Clearly, Baraka's use of Swahili has a ritual function, blurring the lines between political activism, New Age mystical ceremonies and poetic writing – in keeping with the philosophy of the Black Arts Movement. James Smethurst noted the dominance in these years of the idea of "Black Arts as sort of religious or quasi-religious rituals that erased the boundary between performers and audience, taking them to a common space outside European and Euro-American history."[40] Swahili, re-signified by layers of political, historical and cultural discourses, does just that.

Brathwaite's usage of Akan also invests the African language with a symbolic or even utopian value, although it is grounded in a much more individual trajectory. The poet spent eight years in Ghana as a young man working for the educational service of what was then the British colony of the Gold Coast – an opportunity that presented itself, he later said, "by accident", but radically transformed his sense of who he was as well as his practice of poetry.[41] While in Ghana, Brathwaite studied passionately the traditional culture of the Akan people, and unlike Baraka, his knowledge of the Akan language has been well established, including by native Akan speaking intellectuals like Ama Ata Aidoo.[42] The poet provides the reader with a glossary where a number of Akan words ("adom", "akoko", "gyata") are translated, and even in some cases, gives instructions on how they should be pronounced.[43] Brathwaite's encounter with Akan traditional culture – especially its religious rituals – appeared to him as a chance to re-narrate the history of Caribbean people outside of the Western narrative. In *Masks*, he summons the ancient Akan spirits to help him bring the people of the African diaspora "back from sleep":

> Odomankoma' Kyerema se
> Odomankoma' Kyerema se [...]
>
> Funtumi Akore
> Tweneboa Akore
> Spirit of the cedar
> Spirit of the cedar tree
> Tweneboa Kodia
> Funtumi Akore
> Tweneboa Akore
> Spirit of the cedar
> Spirit of the cedar tree
> Tweneboa Kodia
>
> Odomankoma' Kyerema says
> Odomankoma' Kyerema says
> The Great Drummer of Odomankoma says
> The Great Drummer of Odomankoma says
>
> that he has come from sleep

[39] Alphone Lenselaer, *Dictionnaire Swahili-Français*, Paris, Karthala, 1983. Mohammed Abdulla Mohammed, *Modern Swahili Grammar*, Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers, 2001.
[40] James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 2005, p. 78.
[41] Anne Walmsley. *The Caribbean Artists Movement, 1966-1972.* Port of Spain, New Beacon, 1992, p. 39.
[42] Ama Ata Aidoo, "Akan and English". *West Africa* (September 21 1968), p. 24-35.
[43] K. Brathwaite. *The Arrivants*, *op. cit.*, p. 272, 273.

that he has come from sleep
and is arising
and is arising[44]

This poem, entitled "Atumpan" ("talking drum"), weaves together words from a traditional Akan prayer with their translation and interpretation. The feeling of strangeness created in the reader becomes the very image of the cultural fracture brought about by slavery; but the way Brathwaite knits the two languages together and creates echoes between them is emblematic of his longing for a poetic reconnection. For instance, the phrase "Odomankoma' Kyerema se" gives way to "Odomankoma' Kyerema says", where the English word "se" is assonant with the Akan verbal form "se", of similar meaning. Furthermore, in the next metamorphosis of this phrase ("The Great Drummer of Odomankoma says"), the word "kyerema" is translated by its proper English equivalent, "drummer".[45] But more than its meaning, Brathwaite translates the verse's rhythm; the English segment "The Great Drummer of" has five syllables, just like "Odomankoma'", and is similarly stressed on its third syllable. The same rhythmic parallel can be observed between the distiches "Funtumi Akore / Tweneboa Akore" and "Spirit of the cedar / Spirit of the cedar tree". The linguistic strangeness of the Akan terms is overcome by the poetic play on rhythm which connects the words with the reader – just like the talking drum that gave the poem its title can convey words through rhythms if the drummer and the listeners are sufficiently initiated.[46]

The sort of play with linguistic otherness and strangeness found in Nascimento's *Axés* is slightly different, in that the Yoruba terms manifest themselves as signs of an inner otherness of the Brazilian Portuguese language. Certainly, these poems are full of words that will appear foreign to a standard Brazilian Portuguese speaker, words that can be found – with occasional spelling differences - in any Yoruba dictionary ("agadá", "babalaô", "ilu", "opelê", etc.). The author even provides his readers with a glossary, not unlike the one found in Brathwaite. But these words, albeit African, are still presented as Brazilian. One could say, borrowing Alberto da Costa e Silva's elegant formula, that Nascimento writes "as if the ocean was a lie".[47] He uses numerous words that originated from Yoruba but are now used in Brazilian Portuguese, most of them in the domain of the Afro-Brazilian religion known as *candomblé*. Therefore, he uses the Portuguese spelling and does not signal these words with a different font type such as italics. For instance, he writes "Orum" ("heaven/sky") as opposed to "Ọrun" and "Alufá" ("priest") as opposed to "Àlùfã".[48] In other cases, though, the spelling is the same in both languages, as with "pupa" ("red/yellow"), or the difference is limited to one diacritical mark ("Ilu"/"'Ílu" ["drum"}], "Agadá"/"Agada" ["sword"]).[49] In his glossary, even when dealing with these words that have been appropriated by the Portuguese speaking *candomblé* worshippers of Brazil, Nascimento presents them as Yoruba words and explains them with references to the traditional Yoruba worldview. He talks about the cult of "Oxum" (a Portuguese spelling of the Yoruba "Ọšun") that took place in Oshogbo (Nigeria) and links "Odudua" ("Odùdúwà")

[44] K. Brathwaite, *ibid.,* p. 98-99.
[45] *English-Tshi (Asante). A Dictionary, op. cit.,* p. 63.
[46] Germaine Dieterlen, *Textes sacrés d'Afrique noire,* Paris, Gallimard, 1965, p. 105.
[47] Alberto da Costa e Silva, *O vício da África & outros vícios*, Lisbon, João Sá da Costa, 1989, p. 23.
[48] A. Nascimento, *Axés do sangue e da esperança, op. cit.*, p. 108, p. 105.
[49] A. Nascimento, *ibid.*, p. 108, p. 107, p. 105.

to the "symbolic representation of the Yoruba worldview"[50] Whether these words became indigenized within the Portuguese vocabulary of the Brazilian *candomblé* or not, they are still presented as Yoruba, and become the very embodiment of cultural continuity between Africa and the new world. Even a Yoruba expression such as "enia dudu" ("Black people"), which does not have a Brazilian equivalent, is presented in the same fashion as the others, merged in the Portuguese text.[51]

This particular type of multilingualism, characterized by a blurring of the limits between the self and the other, can be interpreted as a poetic expression of Nascimento's ongoing reflection on Brazilian identity and its link to Africa. Despite having been artistically and politically active in the previous decade, it is only in the 1950s and 1960s - and even more so after his exile to the United States in 1968 - that Nascimento started openly rejecting Western culture in favor of a radical Pan-Africanism.[52] In a 1976 interview, he declares having been "born in exile" and only feeling "at home" in Africa or among African people.[53] His discourse is infused with abstract ideological considerations, but as an artist, Nascimento promotes an "experience of *living* Afro-Brazilian culture", something he claims to have found in the attendance of *candomblé* ceremonies in Bahia.[54] Despite making clear that he is not an initiate in the literal sense but someone who uses this religion to create "artistic revelation" rather than actual "mystic trances", the poet describes his experience of creation as that of being possessed by the Yoruba deities of the *candomblé*.[55] When asked in 1972 what he was trying to accomplish as a playwright, he stated that "the Afro-Brazilian theatre ought to be a continuation of the Yoruba folk culture in Brazil. [...] It must transcend [ritual] and still remain ritual."[56] Once again, Nascimento's focus on Yoruba cultural continuity was a creative choice. He was fully aware that many other African cultural influences could be found in Brazil, as he made clear in more theoretical texts like *Mixture or Massacre*.[57] Nonetheless, he used the expression "the Yoruba candomblé"[58] as opposed to saying "Brazilian candomblé" as might have been expected, and labeled the word "axé" – the very title of his poetry collection – "the Brazilian orthography of the Yoruba word *àṣẹ*".[59] The Yoruba culture found in his poems is a transnational, translinguistic ideal more than an acknowledged anthropological reality, confirming Beatriz Góis Dantas' idea as to how the alleged Yoruba (also referred to as Nagô) purity of Afro-Brazilian culture "does not result from fidelity to a tradition, but from a construction in which intellectuals play an important role."[60] The reader of *Axés* is forced to confront the repressed otherness of a Brazilian nation which is

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[50] A. Nascimento, *ibid.*, p. 105, p. 107.

[51] A. Nascimento, *ibid.,* p. 22.

[52] Antonio Guimarães, "Resistência e revolta nos anos 1960: Abdias do Nascimento", *Revista USP* 68 (Dec.-Feb. 2005-2006), p. 161.

[53] Interview with Clóvis Brigagão, reprinted in A. Nascimento & Elisa Larkin Nascimento, *Africans in Brazil. A Pan-African Pespective,* Trenton, Africa World Press, 1992, p. 62.

[54] A. Nascimento & E. Larkin Nascimento, *ibid.,* p. 54-55 (italics are in the original).

[55] A. Nascimento & E. Larkin Nascimento, *ibid..*, p. 55.

[56] Rudy Murray, "An Interview with Abdias do Nascimento", *Black Images* 1/3-4 (1972), p. 40.

[57] A. Nascimento, *Brazil, Mixture Or Massacre? Essays in the Genocide of a Black People*, Dover, The Majority Press, 1989, p. 102-104.

[58] A. Nascimento, *ibid.*, p. 130.

[59] A. Nascimento & E. Larkin Nascimento, *ibid..*, p. 185.

60 Beatriz Góis Dantas, *Nagô Grandma and White Papa: Candomble and the Creation of Afro-Brazilian Identity*, Chapel Hill, U of North Carolina P, 2009, p. 8. On the subject of "Yorubacentrism", see G. Police, *Quilombos dos Palmares : Lectures sur un marronnage brésilien*, Montjoly, Ibis Rouge, 2003, p. 222.

"already African" without realizing it[61], by means of a play with a linguistic strangeness conceived as a *trompe-l'oeil*.

Conclusion

For all their differences, Baraka, Brathwaite and Nascimento could be said to share more than a similar historical experience. Besides their common exploration of the cultural/linguistic dispossession experienced by the descendants of slaves and rejection of Western acculturation, these poets have taken their poetic experiments with multilingualism in analogous directions. The ways they have used the African languages they had encountered in the course of their respective intellectual, political and artistic trajectories are highly congruent. All three have predominantly employed words related to religious ceremonies or rituals (Akan or Yoruba prayers, New Age Revivalist Swahili incantations), and in ways that are themselves reminiscent of rituals.

These particular poetic gestures differ greatly from other multilingual experimentations carried out by the same poets. For instance, Baraka's attempts at code-switching between Standard English and African American vernacular speech, just like Brathwaite's incursions into Barbadian or Jamaican creole languages, are used to ground their poems in popular culture, perceived as the utmost guarantee for authenticity. These sections usually remain at least partially intelligible to most readers, and their tonality is generally lighter, more mundane, with touches of humor. On the other hand, the multilingual play with African languages – ultimate incarnations of what has been lost in the process of slavery – bear an element of transcendence. These more obscure words work as obstacles to the reader's progression through the poem, demanding intensified collaborative efforts on his/her part. They point towards other possible configurations of history, culture and language, inciting the reader to transcend the existing ones. A ritual, as pointed out by Eliade, is a collective activity through which the time of the Myth, radically separated from the here and now, manifests itself.[62] Through this act of transcendence, worshippers escape the profane, linear temporality of life to reconnect with the origins and meaning of the world as it is. Brathwaite, Baraka and Nascimento's poetic rituals similarly use words from distant languages, words they have acquired through conscious processes of self-othering and invested with decisive values, to break from the world as it is, with its established identities, nations and languages. What is thus made visible is not a preexisting mythical past but a re-imagined collective history, bearer of a multiplicity of possible futures. Poetic multilingualism, then, renders the familiarity of (imposed) mother tongues unfamiliar to encourage emancipation; its creates verbal rituals through which diasporic subjects are to be poetically taken outside of themselves, momentarily possessed by the very words from which they have been dispossessed.

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[61] A. Nascimento, *Africans in Brazil, op. cit.,* p. 63.

[62] Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, transl. William Trask, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1959, p. 20.

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