

Amiri Baraka's Revolutionary Theatre: A Reapplication of African Ritual Paradigms

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The rage expressed by Black dramatists in the 1960s may have peaked with the arrival of Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) on the theatrical scene. Prior to this time, a significant part of his growing up was informed by bitterness and violence.

Baraka was born Everett LeRoy Jones in Newark, New Jersey, on October 7 1934. The 1930s depression, World War II, and the 1960s assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and John F. Kennedy provoked his disenchantment with world and America politics, and with America's racial policies. In 1957, following his "undesirable" discharge from the Air Force, for which he had no regrets, Baraka moved to New York.

On settling in Greenwich Village, Baraka spent more time writing poetry and experimenting with drama. The Beat community on New York's Lower East Side afforded him the atmosphere to develop an art that has been defined as "populist modernism." Populist modernism integrated "populist" Black experiences with those aspects of modernist Western literature and literary theory that were considered excellent and, therefore, appropriate. Opposed to bourgeois literature, which, in Baraka's view, catered to the interests and aspirations of the elite and failed to pose a threat to White

America, populist literature played a functional role in targeting common people, particularly Blacks, and addressing critical issues that affected their lives.

The Beat period, 1957-62, was the first phase of Baraka's rebellion against the bourgeois separation of life and art, since, at this time, he began to ascribe to the notion of art as an extension of the artist. To reinforce this ideal, he advocated Bohemianism, an antibourgeois approach that attacked bourgeois life and aesthetic styles. Populist and Bohemian principles offered Baraka an exploratory freedom that was lacking in standard bourgeois art. In departing artistically from middle-class values, he was able to identify emotionally with the oppressed. By the mid-60s Baraka increasingly became involved with Pan-Africanism, protest rallies, and the African-American Civil Rights movement. He leaned toward the dogmas of the Black Nation of Islam, best expressed by Malcolm X. He was particularly swayed by Malcolm X's philosophy of "by any means necessary," and by his contention that racial confrontation was inevitable.

As part of his pursuit of revolutionary and nationalistic ideals, in 1967 Baraka became a Kawaida minister, discarded his "slave" name – LeRoi Jones – and assumed Imamu Amiri (sometimes spelled Ameer) Baraka. Imamu, a Muslim title and Swahili word, signifies "Spiritual Leader," while Amiri, an Arabic (Berber) name, means "Prince." Baraka, also an Arabic name, means "blessed," "sanctity," or "holiness." In 1974 Baraka dropped the title, "Imamu," after he became a Marxist-Leninist.

Baraka's anger and pro-nationalist stance are thus traceable to his political views and activities, for which he had a number of clashes with the police and White racists. In 1967 he was thrown in jail for a "misdemeanor" that was never proven. Affected by this background, the explosion of racial anxiety and violence in the 1960s, and the emergence

of Black artistic, religious, and political movements within and beyond America, Baraka's drama championed aggressive solutions to America's Black crisis. In all, therefore, his emergence as an activist was part of an ongoing artistic and political evolution that spanned the 1950s through the 70s.

The impact of Baraka's transatlantic background on his drama partly manifests in his emergence as a major spokesman for the 1960s Black Arts Movement, which centered on experimentation with African socio-dramatic and religious traditions. In his reliance on African ritual forms, which he restructured within a Black American context, Baraka borrowed from a belief system that forged a close and sacred tie between the people and their social and natural environment. It is a relationship culled from the ancient inseparability of religious practice and secular events – folklore, ceremonies, or festivals. Although these ritual paradigms underwent transformation when they resurfaced in the New World, Baraka sought to reclaim their basic role in African society.

African ancestral models also surfaced in Baraka's support for and commitment to the Black Theatre Movement, an offshoot of the Black Arts Movement. Both Movements shared the quest for a viable, anti-racist, independent Black theatre and influenced the founding of Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theatre in 1965, and his Spirit House Movers and Players troupe in 1968. Activities of the Repertory Theatre and Spirit House centered on the ideals of Baraka's "Black Revolutionary Theatre" manifesto, which defied the ambivalence he associated with integrationist drama, and which further demonstrated his interest in African socio-artistic values.

Presented in 1965, the manifesto heralded the revolutionary drama of the 1960s, which was essentially anti-liberal, anti-academic, and anti-European. The Theatre put

White America on trial in a manner that brought about its symbolic, but hostile confrontation with the Black world. It served as the ideal medium through which Baraka and other revolutionary dramatists foretold an Armageddon that would destroy Euro-Americans and their crony Black bourgeoisie. As chief exponent of the Revolutionary Theatre, Baraka played a leading role in defining a more practical task for Black drama, one that advanced themes of Black survival while teaching the people the relevance of struggle. In advocating such rebellion in art and ideas, the Theatre sought to radicalize or destroy European socio-dramatic ethics by refusing to endorse the reformist character that Baraka identified in pre-1960s Black dramas.

To fulfill the goals of the Revolutionary Theatre, Baraka borrowed from and utilized the efficacy of customary African rituals and sacrifice. His confidence in ritual evolved around his nationalistic “return” to ancestral precepts. In preserving this sacred worldview, his Revolutionary Theatre adopted a rite-of-passage structure that thrived on violence and sacrificial rebirth. In part, therefore, Baraka presented Black drama as an extension of the oral traditions of Africa, and as a genre rooted in specific African sensibilities. The importance of exploiting African ritual and dramatic forms was twofold for Baraka; his plays threatened the oppressor while entering into the rediscovery of his heritage.

As his revolutionary drama progressed, Baraka’s status as Black Nationalist also developed. He increasingly incorporated black-based music, dance, language, and lifestyles as integral parts of his form, and, in this way, retained a deliberate Black and African-rooted rhetoric. The impact of tapping from a broad range of performance elements was with a desire to involve his audience emotionally, intellectually, verbally,

and physically, much like the traditional African spectator-participant that becomes a fundamental part of performance through its choric presence. Up until its demise, the Revolutionary Theatre was reinvigorated by the reciprocal energy that it distributed among its audience.

Beyond the incorporation of several related genres, Baraka's ritual drama was a bloody rite, one of exclusion and vengeance, purging Black society of White profanity. Whites were symbolically judged and exterminated along with their Black accomplices, a pattern aimed at engraining the Theatre's message in the consciousness of its primary Black audience. Bloody sacrifice became Baraka's formula for Black rebirth and American regeneration, which is why his revolutionary plays were structured on recurring archetypal, thematic, and stylistic traits. Characters were typically allegorical, with White adversaries materializing as beasts or devils that had to be judged and destroyed along with their accomplices – middle-class Blacks who failed to reform. As a rule, the dramatic contest presented Black as good and White as evil, where, in the end, good triumphed over evil. It was a courtroom theatre where Whites were summoned and then summarily condemned and punished, and where peaceful negotiations were eschewed.

The functional basis of Baraka's drama was thus situated in a spiritual dimension aroused and sustained through ritual. The communality generated by ritual supported his ideology and retained certain liturgical qualities that derived from his African background. As in African ritual systems, the Revolutionary Theatre did not distinguish the sacred from the secular, ritual from theatre, or theatre from life. It encompassed the total experience and aspirations of the Black community.

In essence, violence was a principal ritual instrument in Baraka's revolutionary dramas. Beyond a strong and sadistic desire to kill Whites, his plays demonstrated the possibility of change through force and determination. In this regard, Baraka found Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" theory germane to the intensity of his Revolutionary Theatre and borrowed from its brutal and exorcist suggestions. In his Introduction to *Four Black Revolutionary Plays*, Baraka warns: "Unless you killing white people, killing the shit they've built, don't read this shit, you wont like it, and it sure wont like you." And then he prophesies "the death of white people" and "the triumph of black life" (1969, vii).

Some of Baraka's plays initially deviate from a ritualistic pattern, but they end with ritual murders, thereby preserving the efficacy of ritual sacrifice. The following are among his most salient plays that fall within this category: *Dutchman* (1964), *The Toilet* (1963), *Experimental Death Unit #1* (1965), *Home On the Range* (1968), *Junkies are Full of (Shhh . . .)* (1968), and *The Death of Malcolm X* (1969).

Other Baraka plays explore race relations in dramatic contexts that are rituals in themselves. What we witness in Baraka, therefore, are two different but contemporaneous tendencies involving a shift from ritualistic plots to plots that parallel ritual growth. Part of this ritual process is achieved when the rites-of-passage of characters and events constitute plot development. As rituals, Baraka's plays manifest more obvious African influences, a trend crowned by his decision to tap from African ritualistic and mythical sources in *Slave Ship*. Major plays that adhere to this structure are: *The Slave: A Fable in a Prologue and Two Acts* (1964), *Slave Ship* (1967), and *Great Goodness of Life: A Coon Show* (1967).

Then again, there are those other Baraka plays that are consciously situated within fantasy worlds. Within this frame, Baraka handles a number of race themes by recreating and reexamining religious characters, subjects, and archetypes from perspectives that are ironic and metaphorical, religious and mythic. When he explores his ideologies in such fantasy worlds, Baraka becomes a mythmaker who devises sacred space for ritual display. Within this realm he escapes the restriction to “real” characters and settings, exploring other innovative possibilities. Baraka plays that belong to this fantasy category include *The Baptism* (1966), *Black Mass* (1965), and *Madheart: A Morality Play* (1967).

In general, Baraka’s style, aims, and themes set a violent, autonomous, and defiant tone for Black drama of the 1960s, and spurred African-American playwrights on to more daring and richer experimentation.

-- Philip U. Effiong

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