

THE QUIET WARRIOR

One of the striking features of Barbados' famous public monument known variously as the Bussa Statue and as the Emancipation Statue, is the following very powerful and moving inscription at the base of the monument:--

“Let my children
rise
in the path
of the morning
up and go forth
on the road
of the morning
run through the fields
in the sun
of the morning,
see the rainbow
of Heaven:
God's curved
mourning
calling.”

This powerful piece of verse is the creation of Barbados' most outstanding poet, historian and Culture scholar — Kamau Brathwaite — and is taken from the poem entitled “Tom” and published in Brathwaite's universally acclaimed poetry collection known as “The Arrivants”.

It is entirely fitting that Kamau Brathwaite's work should be inscribed on the one piece of Barbadian public art that is dedicated to the quest of the African-Barbadian for liberation, for Kamau Brathwaite is perhaps the most outstanding example of a Barbadian who has transcended the spiritual and psychological limitations and constraints of Barbados' colonial heritage.

In Kamau Brathwaite, we Barbadians possess the living example of an extremely creative and intellectually gifted son of the soil who has taken it upon himself to make that necessary inward journey towards the core of his being as a child of Africa transplanted in the New World and shaped by the powerful dialectical (or “tidelectical”) cultural currents of “Plantation America”.

And because of the magnitude and integrity of Kamau's effort, Barbados has received the inestimable gift of a profound native philosopher and creative artist whose work has helped to clarify many of the critical cultural and other existential challenges that we face as a nation.

But who exactly is this Kamau Brathwaite — this quiet warrior — who lives among us at his modest Cow Pastor, Christ Church home, and whose shepherd-like spirit still watches over our nation? Let us spend some time looking more closely at the intimate details of the life of this great Barbadian.

Kamau was born in Barbados in the year 1930 into what was known in those days as a “coloured middle-class oriented family”, and was actually christened “Edward Brathwaite” by his parents, Edward and Beryl Brathwaite. (The African name of Kamau— which means Quiet Warrior — was bestowed upon him much later in life by the famous Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and other African soul-mates during a sojourn in Kenya.)

As a child, young Edward Brathwaite grew up between Mile and a Quarter in St. Peter and Bay Street (Brown’s Beach) in St. Michael , and attended such well known primary schools as St. Mathias, St. Mary’s and Bay Street Primary.

His secondary schooling began at Combermere, where he spent two years before his parents secured a transfer to Harrison College. And this is how Kamau has described his stint at Harrison College :-

“I went to a secondary school originally founded for children of the plantocracy, colonial civil servants and white professionals; but by the time I got there, the social revolution of the 30's was in full swing, and I was able to make friends with boys of stubbornly non-middle class origin.

I was fortunate, also, with my teachers.... they were (with two or three exceptions) happily inefficient as teachers, and none of them seemed to have a stake or interest in our society. We were literally left alone. We picked up what we could or what we wanted from each other and from the few books prescribed like Holy Scripture. With the help of my parents, I applied to do Modern Studies (History and English) in the sixth form..... and succeeded, to everyone’s surprise, in winning one of the Island Scholarships that traditionally took the ex-planter’s sons “home” to Oxbridge or London”.

So these are the bare facts of Kamau’s upbringing in colonial-era Barbados. Some twenty years later, Kamau explained the deeper significance of this upbringing in a very important essay entitled “Timheri” :-

“.... my education and background, though nominally “middle class”, is, on examination, not of this nature at all. I had spent most of my boyhood on the beach and in the sea with “beach-boys”, or in the country, at my grandfather’s with country boys and girls. I was therefore not in a position to make any serious intellectual investment in West Indian middle class values. But since I was not then consciously aware of any other West Indian alternative (though in fact I had been living that alternative), I found and felt myself “rootless” on arrival in England, and like so many other West Indians of the time, more than ready to accept and absorb the culture of the Mother Country. I was, in other words, a potential Afro-Saxon”.

But fortunately for Kamau (and for our society), two things saved this great son of the soil from degeneration into a colonial-minded “Afro-Saxon”. One was the appearance, in 1953, of George Lamming’s seminal Barbadian novel - “In The Castle of my Skin” - with its

exploration of the unique nuances of the culture, sociology and landscapes of Barbados, and its vindication of our Barbadianism and West Indianism.

The other was that upon graduating from Cambridge University in 1955 with a degree in History, the young historian and educator secured a job as an Education Officer in the West African colony of the Gold Coast (now the independent nation of Ghana). For Kamau this was very much a type of spiritual homecoming - a notion that he expressed in his poem entitled "The New Ships" as follows:- "Takoradi was hot. Green struggled through red as we landed.

Laterite lanes drifted off
into dust
into silence.

Mammies crowded with cloths,
flowered and laughed;
white teeth
smooth voices like pebbles
moved by the sea of their language.

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

welcome"

Kamau spent eight years in Ghana, during which time he not only got to know the country and its people intimately through his work as an educator, but with the help of his Guyana born wife -- Doris Welcome aka Zea Mexican-- he also developed a Children's Theatre which produced several of the African-themed plays that he authored in Ghana.

This was a time of important inward spiritual growth for the Barbadian historian/educator/playwright/poet - an experience that he explained in "Timheri" as follows:-

"Slowly, slowly, ever so slowly; obscurely, slowly but surely, during the eight years I lived there, I was coming to an awareness and understanding of community, of cultural wholeness, of the place of the individual within the tribe, in society. Slowly, slowly, ever so slowly, I came to a sense of identification of myself with these

people, my living diviners. I came to connect my history with theirs, the bridge of my mind now linking Atlantic and ancestor, homeland and heartland".

Simply put, Kamau had discovered his intrinsic "African-ness" - not an "African-ness" that made him identical with the new brothers and sisters that he discovered in Ghana, but rather, an "African-ness" that had been shaped by the dislocation of the Middle Passage and the centuries of experiences in Plantation America. But perhaps I should let Kamau speak for himself:-

"When I turned to leave, I was no longer a lonely individual talent: there was something wider, more subtle - the self without ego - without arrogance. And I came home to find that I had not really left. That it was still Africa. Africa in the Caribbean. The middle passage had now guessed its end. The connection between my lived, but unheeded non-middle class boyhood, and its Great Tradition on the eastern (African) mainland had been made".

In 1962 Brathwaite came home not only to a University of the West Indies teaching job, but also to find himself face to face with the West Indian Independence Movement that saw Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago securing their independence in 1962, to be followed by Guyana and Barbados in 1966.

It was in this milieu, and with this new understanding of himself, that Kamau Brathwaite produced some of the most outstanding poetry of the 20th and 21st centuries! A partial listing of his most important volumes of poetry is as follows:-

Rights of Passage (1967); Masks (1968); Islands (1969); The Arrivants (1973); Mother Poem (1977); Sun Poem (1982); X-Self (1987); The Zea Mexican Diary (1993); Dream Stories (1994); Barabajan Poems (1994); Trench Town Rock (1999); Ancestors (2001); Magical Realism (2002); and Born To Slow Horses (2005).

What distinguishes Kamau Brathwaite's body of work is that he consciously sought to use and valorise quintessential aspects of our Barbadian/Caribbean/Afro-American/Pan-African culture. Thus, the rhythmic structure of his poetry ranges from Jazz to Calypso, Limbo, Rasta drumming, and to the rhythms and intonations of the Spiritual Baptists and the practitioners of the West African derived Orisha and Vodun religions.

Kamau also used his poetry as a vehicle to search for our "Nam" or inner essence as a people - an exploration that caused him to lift up and explore our "Nation Language" (commonly condescendingly referred to as "dialect"), and to pierce beneath the surface of our Caribbean landscapes and culturescapes to discern ancestors, African orishas, and fecund and original creation myths and cultural insights.

This body of work is far too voluminous and profound to deal with in greater detail within the confines of this short essay, but there is one special poem that I would like to focus on and bring forcefully to my

readers' attention. To my mind, this poem is the quintessential poem of the Caribbean independence era! It is entitled "Negus" and was first published way back in 1969, in the early years of Independence. It was relevant then, and it is perhaps even more relevant today! It is a poem that every single Caribbean citizen should know by heart! Let us therefore conclude this essay with an excerpt from "Negus" :-

"It
it
it
it is not

it is not
it is not
it is not enough
it is not enough to be free
of the red white and blue
of the drag, of the dragon

it is not
it is not
it is not enough
it is not enough to be free
of the whips, principalities and powers
where is your kingdom of the Word?

it is not
it is not
it is not enough
it is not enough to be free
of malarial fevers, fear of the hurricane,
fear of invasions, crops' drought, fire's
blisters upon the cane

It is not
it is not
it is not enough
to be able to fly to Miami,
structure skyscrapers, excavate the moon
scaped seashore sands to build hotels, casinos, sepulchres

It is not
it is not
it is not enough
it is not enough to be free
to bulldoze god's squatters form their tunes, from their relics
from their tombs of drums

It is not enough
to pray to Barclays bankers on the telephone
to Jesus Christ by short wave radio
to the United States marines by rattling your hip
bones

I

must be given words to shape my name
to the syllables of trees

I
must be given words to refashion futures
like a healer's hand

I
must be given words so that the bees
in my blood's buzzing brain of memory

will make flowers, will make flocks of birds,
will make sky, will make heaven,
the heaven open to the thunder-stone and the volcano and the un-folding land

It is not
it is not
it is not enough
to be pause, to be hole
to be void, to be silent
to be semicolon, to be semicolony;"

DAVID COMISSIONG
President, Clement Payne Movement