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The Cultural and Spiritual Significance of African Ancestral Worship and Festivals: An Analysis of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

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Abstract

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) intricately weaves African religious beliefs, ancestral veneration, and spiritual intervention into its narrative, reflecting the continued presence of the dead in the lives of the living. Rooted in African cosmology and syncretic spiritual traditions, the novel portrays how ancestors maintain a metaphysical influence over their descendants, guiding and shaping their destinies. Mama Day, the eponymous matriarch, embodies this belief system, drawing upon ancestral wisdom and supernatural insight to navigate personal and communal crises. Naylor employs signs, dreams, and nature as mediums through which the past communicates with the present, reinforcing the idea that understanding and honoring one's lineage is vital for survival and self-actualization. This paper explores the role of ancestral intervention in *Mama Day*, analyzing how Naylor reclaims African spiritual heritage within an African American literary framework. By doing so, she challenges Western notions of linear temporality and rationalism, instead presenting a worldview where time is cyclical, the spiritual is intertwined with the material, and the dead remain active participants in the affairs of the living.

Key Words: Ancestral Workship, Gloria Naylor, African Spiritual heritage, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

Introduction

African religious belief holds that people continue to live after their death as ancestors, who possess the power to intervene in the life of their descendants and so the living are advised to find out their ancestors' needs through various signs. They commune and direct the well-being of the living. People's prayer strengthens the spirits, who in turn guide them for great success: "Ancestor worship in the South derives largely from the myth of southern aristocracy, of superior merit inherited through blood and genteel culture. Its depiction in southern literary works, both fictional and nonfictional, has been treated sometimes with high seriousness, sometimes with irony" (Flora and Mackethan 33).

Naylor uses ancestral power in her novels like Tony Morrison "to debunk the rhetoric of self-reliance as the key to prosperity and instead uses her characters to promote ancestral connections as the linchpin of success. Morrison believes that the relationship between character and ancestor, antagonistic or amicable, directly correlates with that character's success in navigating life" (Beaulieu 5).

Ancestral Workship in Naylor's Mama Day

Sapphira Wade is a legend who freed the people of Willow Springs from Bascombe Wade in the year 1823. She was a true conjuror. She can cure the pain of all living creatures. Naylor explains her power: "She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightening to start the kindling going under her medicine pot: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her" (MD 3). She married Bascombe Wade, bore seven children and, to stop his trouble, she killed him. She gave every inch of the land to the slaves in 1823. Abigail and Mama Day are the descendants of the seventh son. The people in Willow Springs believe that she still lives with

them. Everyone knows her story but no one is bold enough to utter her name: "Yes, the *name* Sapphira Wade is never breathed out of a single mouth in Willow Springs" (MD 4). She becomes a myth and they refer to her as 18 & 23.

Naylor notes the misinterpretation of the African culture and myth by the westerners through Reema's boy. He has studied in the city and comes to Willow Springs with his notebooks and tape recorder. The purpose of his visit is to put Willow Springs on the map. He goes around asking various questions about ethnography, unique speech pattern, and cultural preservations. He then asks about 18 & 23, he goes to all the places to find out what 18 & 23 really means but he does not get the answer. He finally informs "that 18 & 23 wasn't 18 & 23 at all—was really 81 & 32, which just so happened to be the lines of longitude and latitude marking off where Willow Springs sits on the map. And we were just so damned dumb that we turned the whole thing around" (MD 7-8). Felton and Loris rightly point out his effort: "The vanity of attempts by the white world to assimilate, order, and define this black one is suggested in the anecdote about one Willow Springs resident who returns to do anthropological work. Imbued with the values of the white world in which he has been educated" (113).

George having been brought up in New York does not believe in the existence of ancestors. Conflict occurs when he tries to devalue the African practices. When Cocoa explains the traditional practices he admires them but cannot realize their real value with his rational mind-set. Cocoa takes him to the family grave yard and directs him to put moss on his shoes before entering the grave yard, as it is a traditional practice. He asks why he should do so and what will happen if he enters without doing so. His questions irritate her. She replies that it is a traditional practice. She is not able to answer all his questions and directs him to ask the questions to Mama Day.

He is overwhelmed to see the arrangement of tombstones. All the tombstones are named "Days" yet no date is mentioned. He criticizes saying "But what, as in your case, if a woman married? You live a Day and You die a Day. Early women's lib, I said with a smile" (MD 218). The tombstones are grouped according to generation. Their height represents the number of years they lived. George does not believe in the myth about Sapphira Wade and Bascombe Wade because with his rational approach he expects a proof of their existence. Even though he does not understand the cultural values of the Day family, he is astonished by the arrangements of the graveyard. Days' family structure triumphs over the American family because Americans are struggling for a family set-up. William J. Bennett points out the condition of the American family:

> Virtually every opinion poll shows that the American people are deeply worried about the state of the family. They have good reason to be worried—even, I would say, frightened. Compared to a generation ago, American families today are much less stable; marriage is far less central; divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and cohabitation are vastly more common; and children are more vulnerable and neglected, less well-off, and less valued. Public attitudes toward marriage, sexual ethics, and child-rearing have radically altered for the worse. (1)

George's effort in demoting the African culture is visible when Cocoa informs him about Sapphira Wade as great, great, grandmother and her skills. He doubts the very existence of her and questions the central belief of the island. He asks for some proof like, papers of the slave trade. Kelley testifies to George's nature: "What Cocoa's husband, George, confronts in Willow Springs, a sea island off the coasts of both Georgia and South Carolina, is the power of matricentric cultural myth, necromancy, and a worldview that contradicts his own belief systems" (92-93). Finally he stops asking questions as he becomes aware of her sensitiveness

to her tradition: "You were always very sensitive about your complexion, going out of your way to stress that you were a black woman if someone was about to mistake you for a Spaniard or Creole."(MD 219). Morrison mentions the role of ancestors in African literature:

> It seems to me interesting to evaluate Black literature on what the writer does with the presence of the ancestor. Which is to say a grandfather as in Ralph Ellison, or grandmother as in Toni Cade Bambara, or a healer as in Bambara or Henry Dumas. There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom. (McKay 57)

George praises her black spirit and acknowledges that she "could have easily descended from that slave woman who talked a man out of a whole island" (MD 219). She feels sad for his inability to understand her people and place and considers it her mistake to have brought him to Willow Springs. When they enter the family plot she hears her ancestors whispering as she says, "I could hear them all in the wind as if moved through the trees and stirred up dust along the ground" (MD 223). But she makes no reference to them in his presence because he will not believe. In this regard Fowler observes:

> The family tree visually links the living members of the Day family—Miranda, Abigail, and Cocoa—to the dead members, a connection that is central in the novel itself, for both Miranda and Cocoa hear the voices of their ancestors when they visit their graves, and Miranda actually communes with her ancestors. (94)

Ruby hates the woman who comes closer to her husband Junior Lee. When he shows interest in Cocoa, she poisons her. Ancestors direct Mama Day to seek support from George as it is the only way to save Cocoa. This is the reason why "Miranda has to comfort the spirit of Peace in the well, dream Sapphira's name, and place herself at the ancestral home before

she can help Cocoa, for all three efforts are symbolic gestures of ancestor communion" (Kelley 94).

She expects George to bury his western beliefs in himself as he has to believe in the myth and tradition of Willow Springs: "A single moment was all she asked, even a fingertip to touch hers at the other place. So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over" (MD 285). So far Mama Day does not try to explain the importance of their practices but at this stage she has to clarify to him the values of such practices. She climbs the attic to prove the existence of Sapphira Wade and takes the "Black leather binding, long and narrow, bent almost in two from being jammed into the point of the roof. That had to be hidden there on purpose" (MD 279). She brings that to the bed room and reads to confirm the slave purchase of Sapphira Wade: "*Tuesday, 3rd Day August…Sold to Mister Bascombe Wade of Willow Springs, one negress answering to the name Sa…*" (MD 280).

Mama Day gives the ledger and walking cane to George. Finally he suspends his disbelief in order to save Cocoa. He succeeds in saving her by sacrificing his life, thereby proving the African belief. Naylor establishes the existence of ancestors through George's communication with Cocoa after his death: "This connection between the living and the dead, which is also represented in the silent conversation between the dead George and the living Cocoa that comprises much of the narrative, points to the African belief system operating in Willow Springs" (Fowler 94). Wilson underlines the triumph of the African belief of ancestors:

> George is, of course, narrating from the grave, and as such, he links death with life. Just as Mama Day bridges the gap between life and death when she visits the other place to commune with the spirit of her ancestors, George's narrative sections make a

> similar bridge. Though he is dead, he still impacts Cocoa's present life, and the memory of their life together will always be a part of Cocoa's existence. (99)

Beaulieu opines:

> For the Yoruba of Nigeria, in West Africa, ancestors are everywhere: in the earth, in the air, and within one's children. Their presence links souls of the present with souls of the past. Their lessons transcend both time and space—enriching their descendants with a perspective full of other world wisdom applicable to this world. They are deities or family members who have passed on, yet remain accessible to the living. They are the ancestors. (4)

The people in Willow Springs celebrate "Candle Walk" instead of Christmas. This celebration is based on the story of the formation of Willow Springs that, God spat the island from his mouth and that when He was trying to scoop it, He found His hands shaking with the greatest conjure woman. She pleaded with Him to leave them as "I ain't got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people, but I can lead on with light" (MD 110). In this belief the people celebrate the festival on every December 22 by holding candles in their hands to guide the spirit of the conjuror. During Candle Walk they share gifts, sweets, wine, etc as a token of love. Further they help the poor without being noticed. Kelley points out the importance of gifts for the survival of the community:

> Gifts can reinforce community by providing a quiet mechanism for those who have to share with those who need, thereby making welfare and other state-sponsored aid less necessary, as well as making the survival of the group more important than 'making a point.' In Willow Springs, Candle Walk continues in the present of the text, a time that is not some overly idealized preindustrial era but rather is close to our own era (much

of it occurs during the 1980s), a time one would be hard pressed to associate with economic selflessness in this country. (152)

There are a number of people like Reverend Hooper who have tried to stop Candle Walk by saying that the folks have mistaken Candle Walk for Christmas but "Any fool knows Christmas is December twenty-fifth—that ain't never caught on too much here. And Candle Walk is always the night of the twenty-second" (MD 108). Folks thank Miranda for helping them with her medical skills. They thank her with "Bushels of cabbage, tomatoes, onions, and beets. A mountain of jams, jellies, and pickled everything" (MD 108).

There are some changes in the celebration; old people bring candles because they feel it was the way followed from the beginning. Young folks bring kerosene lamps as they feel it is comfortable. Candle Walk is "a way of getting help without feeling obliged" (MD 110). They greet their neighbours with "Come my way, Candle Walk" and get gifts from them. It is not compulsory to give anything back. They exchange gifts without the consideration of the value with a lift of the candle light and whispering, "Lead on with light" (MD 110). Fowler affirms the rituals they perform to their ancestors: "Just as the gifts of Candle Walk emphasize the importance of creating from the materials the earth provides, so the intonation of 'Lead on with light' is connected to the spiritual guidance provided by the ancient mother Sapphira" (119). Vivan M. May points out the importance of festivals in African literature: "African American writers have always incorporated the colorful rituals and culturally centered themes of their people's traditional annual and occational festivals in their literature" (Andrews, Frances and Harris 273).

Candle Walk keeps on changing every year. Some young folks drive their car with the headlights on, telling "Lead on, lead on!" (MD 111). The people fear that the festival may end as it changes every year. But Mama Day knows that there is no need to fear because Candle

Walk was different in her time. It had been more different in her father John-Paul's time as he asserts: "Folks in John-Paul's time would line the main road with candles, food, and silver of ginger to help her spirit along. And Miranda says that her daddy said *his* daddy said Candle Walk was different still" (MD 111). Mama Day knows that it will take generations to stop celebrating Candle Walk and that it will take some more generations to stop talking about it. But looking at this people celebrating candle walk now, no one can imagine the end of the celebration. Lamothe opines about Miranda's positive thinking about Candle Walk:

> The transformation that some regard as ruinous assimilation, Miranda views as healthy and inevitable. She recognizes that aspects of tradition remain and mingle with the new; that a hybrid culture is, and has always been, developing. Moreover, her thoughts about her father, John Paul, imply that even the complaints of elders who resist change are a ritualized part of the celebration. Thus, storytelling during and about the Christmas ritual is the vehicle of continuity, as opposed to the actual form that the ritual takes.

The west woods are of forty nine acres belonging to the Days. Mama Day walks in the west woods to reach her house after celebrating Candle Walk. All of the Days' ancestors are buried in the west woods but Sapphira's tombstone is missing. John-Paul and three of his brothers searched for her for weeks at the bottom of the sea but they could not find her. They believed that she had flown away. Mama Day can walk in the west woods absent - sighted as she knows every nook and corner. But on that day she finds it difficult to walk because she cannot step properly by judging the place with the light image. She does not have the intention to go to the other place. The family plot of the Days is referred to as the "other place," where Mama Day communes with her ancestors. It is an old building with a big garden, where Mama Day "Abigail and peace was born there. My daddy and his brothers as

well. And it's where my mama sat, rocking herself to death" (MD 117-118). While walking she feels that something is waiting for her to know. She sees the image of Sapphira Wade's spirit with a long wool skirt and heavy leather boot. She cannot believe her eyes. She feels as if she is going to die: "I'm gonna finish this Candle Walk" (MD 118). When the breeze flickers her candle out she does not light the candle. She imagines the words of her father about the Candle Walk, when the spirit passes to the main road. Her vision of the great grandmother reveals the truth and value of the African festivals. Dorothy Perry Thompson suggests the relevance of ancestor worship in Afro-American works:

> Sapphira's and Miranda's powers of conjuring are an element of spiralytic recession/expansion in African womanism. In their figurations, the two women move away from the womanist (black American feminist) tradition toward models that reflect the African past. Sapphira is the ancestor/goddess, a recurring figure in the fiction of African and African-American women writers. She is the conflation of the need for a new woman-centered spirituality and ancient African ancestor worship. (Kelley 93)

Conclusion

The analysis underscores the supremacy and resilience of African culture, as evidenced by George's eventual acceptance of African cultural practices. His transformation signifies the enduring influence of African traditions, even in the presence of Western ideologies. Furthermore, the image of Sapphira Wade, as perceived by Mama Day, reinforces the significance of ancestral connections and the cultural value embedded in African festivals. These elements collectively highlight the depth and continuity of African heritage, illustrating its ability to shape identities and bridge generational experiences. Ultimately, this study

reaffirms the centrality of African traditions in fostering a sense of belonging and cultural pride.

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