V.S. Naipaul's *The Masque of Africa*[1]: A Case for African Belief

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Africa, a symbol of darkness, safari, voodoism, animism, primitivism, tribalism, other world, totemism, etc. still remains a mystery and puzzle. Quite a few historians, travel writers and creative artists like Mungo Park (*Travels in the Interior of Africa*), John Hanning Speke (*The Discovery of the Nile Sources*), Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*), Georges Simenon (*Tropic Moon*), Frantz Fanon (*Black Skin, White Masks and The Wretched of the Earth*), Dan Jacobson (*The Electronic Elephant*), Ryszard Kapuscinski (*The Shadow of the Sun*), Paul Theroux (*Dark Star Safari*), Gil Courtemanche (*A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*), Rian Malan (*My Traitor's Heart*), Binyavanga Wainaina (*How to Write About Africa*), etc. wrote about this great continent. Perhaps Naipaul thought that these books have not made an authentic, impartial, objective, dispassionate and comprehensive account of the complexity and diversity of African belief. By employing the technique of the Particular to the Universal, he wrote his latest full-length work of non-fiction *The Masque of Africa* with a view to examining "the workings of African traditional belief."[2]

Masques are usually dramatic entertainments involving dances and disguises, in which the spectacular and musical elements predominate over plot and character. They are primarily written for a special occasion and are usually performed at court. Ben Jonson, one of the leading writers of masques, introduced the 'antimasque' element as a comic and grotesque foil to the main spectacle. But Naipaul's *The Masque of Africa* is a prose piece without political overtones and a distinct masque which encompasses a larger purpose of providing a serious tone to the existing narratives on Africa, a continent primarily known for dances and music. It is mainly a quest through the African continent, for the spirit of African belief, the belief systems that preceded the arrival of Christianity and Islam. In Naipaul's own words,

> My theme is belief, not political or economical life; … Perhaps an unspoken aspect of my enquiry was the possibility of the subversion of old Africa by the ways of the outside world.[3]

Naipaul's *Masque* is written with a specific purpose, particularly to witness African belief by going "far back to the beginning of things. To reach that beginning was the purpose of my book."[4]

Naipaul, unarguably one of the greatest living writers in English, employs the technique of proceeding from the Particular to the Universal. With a view to discovering the nature of African belief, he travels across six countries – Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Gabon, and South Africa – and discourses with teachers, writers, academics, pharmacists, kings, queens and chiefs, businessmen, friends of friends, and other African intellectuals. These visits transcend the

confines of the particular and acquire universality of appeal in earnestly navigating the African mind. John Milton's *Comus*, a powerful masque, has in it a didactic note of the conflict between virtue and vice.

> Virtue may be assailed, but never hurt,
>
> Surprised by unjust force, but not enthralled.[5]

Similarly Naipaul's *Masque* closes with a serious note thus:

> After apartheid a resolution is not really possible until the people who wish to impose themselves on Africa violate some essential part of their being. (325)

Even the Swedish Academy while awarding the Noble Prize for Literature, described Naipaul as "the annalist of the destinies of empires in the moral sense: what they do to human beings. His authority as a narrator is grounded in the memory of what others have forgotten, the history of the vanquished."[6]

In Uganda, Susan, a poet and a university teacher, helps Naipaul in his journey of discovering African belief in the ancestors. He visits the sacred tombs of Mutesa and other Bugandan Kabakas at Kasubi. He seems to think that there is something intrinsically and peculiarly African about ancestor worship. For quite some time, Uganda lived itself without much connection with the other world. The good old rulers – Mutesa dynasty and other Bugandan Kabakas – built 'roads as straight as Roman roads; they had a high idea of sanitation; they had a fleet on the Lake Victoria, with an admiral and naval techniques of their own … They worked iron and made their own spears and knives; they knew how to make bark cloth and were beautiful builders of grass houses' (5-6). With the advent of the foreign religions – Islam and Christianity – in Buganda much havoc has been wrought with African belief. According to the people whom Naipaul had dialogue, 'Christianity and Islam offered an afterlife; gave people a vision of themselves living on after death. African religion, on the other hand, was more airy, offering only the world of spirits, and the ancestors' (7). Naipaul is easily critical of foreign religions which are like the applied and contagious illnesses, 'curing nothing,' giving no final answers, keeping everyone in a state of nerves, fighting long battles, narrowing the mind' (6).

Naipaul continues to depict the enduring belief of the Africans in their ancient rulers. The traditional palace of the Kabakas has been restored and the royal regalia of drums and spears are preserved both as a shrine and tourist attraction. Kasubi tomb was the centre of veneration. Kabakas, the rulers of Buganda, were buried there. The belief of people was that the Kabakas did not die, but they disappeared and went to the forest. The description of the burial of a Kabaka is picturesque and pithy: 'The burial of a Kabaka was not straightforward. It was hemmed in by rituals that would have come from the remote past (remote, since people without writing and books cannot remember beyond their grandparents or great-grandparents). The corpse of the king would have been dried over a slow fire for three months. Then the jawbone would have been detached and worked over with beads or cowries; this, together with the umbilical cord, also worked with beads, and the penis and testicles, in a pouch of animal skin, was what would have been buried here. The rest of the body, the unessential man, so to speak, would have been sent

somewhere else; but this part of the ritual remained obscure. I could get no direct answer' (12-13).

Unlike other writers, Naipaul met multitudes of the Ugandans and gathered from them that most Africans had displeased their ancestors by taking other religions. The deniers of the traditional religion will soon meet with retribution. Already the horrors of Amin and Obote brought 'a full century of disorder' (31). The West and the modernity took away much of their culture and civilization. Like a typical African, Susan says: 'I feel that my people had a civilization. It was different but it was their own. I taught myself to write in Luganda … I feel humiliated that the school did not teach us our mother tongue' (32). Similar hue and cry was raised by Ngugi in his powerful work *Homecoming* where his reflections on the writer's relationship depend on the past. One is supposed to know the historical events associated with colonization. A writer "must come to terms with history and sensitively register his encounter with history, his people's history."[7]

Like the old Germanic peoples, the people of Uganda had their shrines in the open, in beautiful groves or glades or rivers 'places which then became instinct with the spirit of the god. The most spectacular of these natural shrines was Sezibwa waterfall at the top of which was a secret spot where dwelt the spirit of the place. The tribal story says that the water there washes away curses. You must be barefooted, though, to show respect for a holy place; and you must wash your face and hands nine times' (35). Perhaps, this is akin to Naipaul's romantic idea of the earth religions. He says:

> I felt they took us back to the beginning, a philosophical Big Bang, and I cherished them for that reason. I thought they had a kind of beauty. But the past here (Africa) still lived. (95)

Habib, a wealthy businessman, raised as a Muslim, was taught to despise the African religions. He tells the author frankly that the imperialists tried to control the African mind. The author while seeing the competing mosques and evangelical churches, notices the battle for African minds and souls. Throughout Uganda, Naipaul ventures to take us back to the 'beginning of things,' the core of African belief.

Naipaul's account of the African belief pertains to the native diviners who read the future in Uganda. The African concept of 'energy' remains constant throughout Africa as it (energy) is to be tapped into by the ritual sacrifice of body parts. The African religion has begun to develop a cosmogony according to which the replacement of the angels took place by the ancestors. There is also the appearance of mediums who can invoke the ancestors. The powers of God, the guiding being who knows all and has been in existence forever, can reside only in a royal person, a Kabaka. The Kabaka is linked to the spirit world; the mediums are linked to the ancestors. This is where the cosmogony touches earth and the Baganda. The witchdoctor has the powers to communicate with the spirits. According to the advice given by the spirits, he healed the troubled ones. The African religion was based on the veneration of the ancestors. The people were ruled by the idea of loyalty and obedience to their ancestors. These qualities, taken together, made them a great fighting force and gave the Baganda their empire, which lasted some centuries.

Naipaul's quest starts later in Nigeria where he visits sacred sites or shrines and

witnesses festivals. The Nigerians celebrate the festival of Osun Osogbo which people from Brazil, Cuba and Haiti witness. This is a very important festival which truly sustains their belief in their religion. The festival goes on for a week. On the final day a virgin with a big calabash on her head walks to the river followed by legions of people, and she pours the contents of the calabash into the river, giving it a libation. In an interview with Oba, a king of Lagos, Naipaul gathered how the Portuguese had their sway before the Britishers entered. He asked the Oba about the religions of the earth for which the latter replied that he was the trustee of the local people, trustee for the dead, the living and those to come. The Oba also gave the details regarding the history of Lagos and the idea of trusteeship.

Naipaul next met Adesina, an important business executive who took him to a soothsayer (the babalawo, witchdoctor, the juju man, medicine man, magician, the herbalist, the diviner and a Shaman) who told them about the spirits that would go from place to place and guide them properly. He in his quest for African belief, was led to Oni of Ife who was the religious head of the Yorubas of Nigeria. The ground of Ife was the source of civilization. It was sacred for all Yorubas and the black race generally. There was a well that held a sacred and undying memory of the wife of the very first Oni of Ife. She was very beautiful and her marriage to the Oni was a success. It would have been a perfect marriage if she could have had a child. It was important for the Oni to have a child. But there was no child. So the good woman sacrificed herself. She had the Oni married to another woman, and became a water sprite, an eternal protectress of the Oni and his family. 'This was the origin of the well. It was said to be bottomless. It had a brackish smell … The tradition was that at the time of his enthronement the Oni's feet had first to be washed with water from this well. And because the well looked after him and his children, the Oni had to tell the well when he was leaving Ife' (131).

The tall man in the diviner's palace narrated at length, about the staff of a giant who protected the Yorubas and made them prosperous. In due course the giant was called to 'the world of spirits. He left behind his staff and a trumpet, and his instructions were that whenever the Yoruba needed him the trumpet was to be sounded. One day an idle young fellow, having no regard for the story, blew on the trumpet. A giant figure began then to stride over the earth, laying people low left and right with his sword. A woman ran out to the giant and said, 'Madman, can't you see what you are doing? These people are your own. The giant picked up a severed head by the hair and saw that the head did indeed belong to a Yoruba. He was mortified. He laid down his weapons and vowed never to come back to earth. But he wished before he left them for good to give his Yoruba people a final boon. The boon was this 'the Yoruba people would always be successful in war. Then he went away' (133).

Next Naipaul continued his investigations in a secret grove of great beauty near Osun where a river festival was celebrated every year and thousands of the black diaspora participated in it. The event had now taken hold; 'and the people of the diaspora who came for it would understand that though they had taken many of the Yoruba gods across the water, and though the whole apparatus of the supernatural had also travelled with them, reminding men of the precariousness of their hold on life, and though they had taken much of this Yoruba magic to the New World, making that

difficult world safe, they could never take the sacred grove with them. That remained in Africa' (138-139).

Naipaul's next search is in Ghana, west stretch of African coast. Kozo, an Ashanti, enlightened him with regard to the African belief. The Ashanti religion was not too intrusive. It had ancestral gods who are primarily figures of healing. They perform certain cultural rights at times of death, birth, and puberty. Every family had an elder who can do the rites; the knowledge is passed on from generation to generation. But the Gaa religion of the coastal Ghana was rooted in the spirits of the departed. Pa-boh, a local leader, interpreted the Gaa religion and its tenets. On the street outside there was the oracle house where the offerings of palm oil or eggs in an earthen pot were made. One must be chosen by the high priest to go inside the house. The spirits, the lesser deities, and the gods bridge the great distance between human beings and the supreme being, who is very powerful and is not to be used in daily rituals. The others, spirits and gods and so on, are invoked daily. They have physical representations: trees, stumps, stools, carved idols, rivers, and pools. Every community has its own set of deities of this sort, who protect and heal. These deities have their own spokesmen, who are high priests and prophetesses. They have to be initiated into the cults. Both the high priests and prophetesses who are possessed take up the issues of people and solve them by 'talking in unknown languages.'

Religious beliefs and cultural practices go hand in hand in Ghana. They dictate the culture of the country. When a child is born water and palm wine are poured into its mouth. This links the baby to the earth. At puberty the child is covered in ash or a greenish-coloured clay and presented to the village while the villagers sing and dance there. The songs which are important for them 'spell out the history and moral expectations of the community, and the child gets to know what its responsibilities are towards the family and the community. An ancestor is a point of reference for the young. Anyone who behaves well can become an ancestor when he is old or when he dies' (162).

There are different rituals for different deaths. When a chief is dead, a special kind of language has to be used to protect people. They use the language of life and say that the 'chief has travelled,' or 'he has turned round against life,' or 'he has gone to pluck a leaf,' or 'he has gone to his forefathers' village.' The coffin is to be called 'a dead house.' At death, the high priest, a physical representation of the spirits, wears white and carries a broom in his hand. The broom stands for his cleansing function. The traditional religion in Ghana is dying slowly. It started to die when the Europeans and Muslims came and saw them as pagans. The modern African is in a very difficult situation. There is a need for him to look at it and modify it.

Naipaul's next search for African belief occurs in Ivory Coast where he is told about Felix Houphouet-Boigny, an enduring paternal president, who consults a witchdoctor with a view to getting power for life. Following the advice of the herbalist, Houphouet had had himself cut into little pieces which had been boiled together with magical herbs in a cooking pot where at a crucial moment the Houphouet pieces had come together and turned into a powerful snake. A trusted helper had wrestled the snake to the ground that had turned into Houphouet again. Since then, Houphouet won power for life

and remained the president of the Ivory Coast. 'He had remained father of his people, a grand old man, le vieux' (198). He built his country religiously, but he remained 'like a pharaoh – Shelley's Ozymandias again' (212). As in the case of the rulers of Buganda, Naipaul makes references to the ephemeral nature of power.

Naipaul's next stop was Gabon which represents the African spirit in its forest. He wanted to know about the forest lore and the primal knowledge that is structured there. He met Guy Rossatanga-Rignault, a lawyer, who said that the new religions, Islam and Christianity, are just on the top. 'Inside us is the forest' (217). He also said that one must understand the forest, if one wants to know the vision of the people of Gabon as the mental set up of the Gabons is linked to everything in the forest. They feel that everything there has life, even trees. 'There is a mystical tree, a red tree. When we go to the forest we talk to it and tell it our problems. We also ask its permission to cut its branch or bark, and we tell the tree why we are taking its bark, why we are cutting it… All tribes have totems here, and that totem is taboo for them. They can never kill or harm their totem. They can never hurt it. It can be a crocodile, parrot, monkey, anything' (222).

Everyone in Gabon believes in the principle of 'energy' that the forest exemplifies. This is the principle that keeps people going. To lose energy is to fade away. To revive it is to get new energy from some source. The Gabons believe that every living thing is 'energy.' Every one is like a battery. There is no such thing as a natural death. If someone dies in the family they feel that someone has taken his energy. 'To do that you have to kill the victim, be it man or animal. You kill and take their energy. They go to the witchdoctor to take someone's energy. Sometimes they feel that they have to do a ritual sacrifice' (222). The truth is whatever formal religion the family prophecies, there are the old African ways that have to be honoured and perhaps are more pressing than the formal outer faith.

According to Rossatanga, the religion of the forest is a set of beliefs. The Gabons do not pray to God because they believe that God is not accessible to humans as He has 'many other problems and has no time for humans' (225) … Only the ancestors can intercede with God. By keeping the bones and skull of the ancestor and also feeding it rum one can talk to him (ancestor) and discuss the problems. In each family one man, after initiation under the guidance of an elder, can talk to the ancestor and solve their problems. Surprisingly, their music, painting, sculpture and everything is linked with the forest.

The pigmies, the first inhabitants of the forest, showed the Bantu migrants the 'path' of the forest and the philosophy of the forest. Everyone goes to them in secret for healing. For initiation, barrenness, for sickness the pigmies, with their knowledge of the forest, help others. According to Claudine, the pigmies hold the knowledge of the world and they also preserve the knowledge of the forest. There are two kinds of healers. The small healer deals with malaria and influenza. The master healer who knows the 'tactics' of the spiritual world, would solve bigger problems. They slowly realize that the world has changed and they must also enter the new world … After initiation, they communicate with ancestors.

The forest is peaceful and tranquil and one can think about "myself" (241).

People are not afraid of the forest and the dangers there. The narrator discusses at length the forest: "I am not afraid of the forest. I never think of the dangers there, 'because you radiate energy. Animals can smell negative waves of fear and then they attack. It is here, in the forest, that I understood that the forest talks to us. It asks us questions, and it feeds us. It is the beginning and the end, and that is why pigmies, who understand this, are the masters' (241-242). In Fang legend called Odzaboga, the adepts, after initiation, make their hallucinogen-powered journeys, accompanied by gombi harpists whose instruments are notionally strung with the intestines of the first ancestors, the first men of the forests. These astral journeys throw light on the relationship between the people and the forest.

Africans eat not only elephants and dogs, and cats, but everything else with life. The forest, with its apparently endless supply of 'bush meat' was like a free supermarket, open to everyone. Mobiet, a white American, became initiated to 'eboga' initiation with a view to knowing how to direct his energy. He can now listen to his inner voice. A village chief told the author about the sirens in the river. They protected the river and they did not like intruders. The evangelical churches were a threat to the traditional religion. The Gabons feel that the plants in the forest are conscious beings. They have spirits and they 'have special and many chemical properties that can be used if we talk to them.'

Naipaul's next search starts in South Africa, 'a country of science and money,' which continues its legacy of enduring and unavoidable apartheid. He observes that 'the white people built themselves a moonbase for their civilization; when that crumbles there is nothing for black or white' (280). In Johannesburg witchdoctors' goods were extensively given over to new merchandise. The beauty of Nigeria, the Gabonese idea of energy that was linked to the idea and wonder of the mighty forests etc. were not there in South Africa. Instead there was the pain of apartheid. Naipaul earnestly feels that the word 'coloured' implies the good old ancestor who was a Bushman: 'the equivalent here of what a pigmy was in Gabon, physically negligible, but also to be considered the first man, full of wisdom about trees and plants and poisons' (286).

In South Africa Naipaul never wanted to consider politics and race as his main interest was with 'the core of African belief' (288). He notes that even if one is a Christian, one is supposed to sacrifice an ox or cow for the ancestors at the time of funeral. But in the recent past, many Christian 'churches straddle and suffocate the African identity' (211).

Phillip, one of the subjects of South Africa, told the author that the transition from apartheid to democracy through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, had provided the sense of humanity to some extent in South Africa. Joseph, a Zulu traditionalist, said that foreign media had no regard for local traditions and the South African way of by-passing the white man's law. He was sorry for the South Africans who lost all their traditions and who were doing the wrong thing. African wealth, according to him, was 'land, women, cattle, crops and children, and 'now all that is gone' (310). 'Now, when there was no tradition, and people had no idea where they came from, they had very little regard for the tombs of their kings, and … The ancient graves of the Zulu Kings – buried in a sitting position and wrapped in a cowskin

– were neglected' (313). Zulu traditionalists like Joseph, practice the old ways. They go to the townships to slaughter the animal, and if the ritual is very complicated then they will go to their ancestral villages where they have their own shrines for worship.

Naipaul went to the Mandela house in Soweto and called on Mrs. Mandela who had intense political passion. She played an active role in the Soweto revolution in 1976. She felt wounded as Mandela was commercialized. She became critical of the neo-colonial practices of Mandela. "They took malleable blacks and made them partners. But those who had struggled and had given blood were left with nothing. They are still in shacks: no electricity, no sanitation, and no chance of an education' (316-317). Mrs. Mandela felt very bad when Mandela went to get the Nobel Prize with his jailer De Klerk. She became critical of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which was not realistic as it 'opened up wounds that could not heal' (317). She, as a Zulu, believed in her ancestors and so she would go to the graves of her ancestors and asked them for their help. She also believed that the ancestors worked with God. She sustained her African identity, though she became critical of the whites.

Besides meeting many groups in South Africa, Naipaul in the end turns to Rian Malan, a writer and also an Afrikaner for nine generations, whose book *My Traitor's Heart* discusses the bloody division between black and white. Malan narrates a parable where a white couple – Neil and Creina – move to a piece of church land on the boundary of white South Africa and begin to practice their simple, machinesless agriculture that might attract Africans. The land is rockey and arid … besides 'borderland hate: white for black, and all the unreasoning hate – often blazing up into full-scale war – that the Zulu factions have for one another.' They work the unpromising land until the Church asks them to leave the place for having committed the sin of giving birth-control pills to African women. Luckily they get a piece of land, sixty miles away from a South African Corporation. They try there a self-sustaining agriculture project that would have solar cookers and methane-digesters. The project was taking of in 'eleven Zulu-style huts.' But soon Neil faced problems from white farmers as well as Zulus. The former thought that Neil was giving Africans too much encouragement whereas the latter had their own inherent love for fighting. At last he was killed in an ambush by Zulu warriors. Life became harder for Creina, but she did not leave the place as she believed in the dictum that love is worth nothing until it has been tested by its own defeat. She tells Rian Malan 'I think you will know what I mean if I tell you love is worth nothing until it has been tested by its own defeat' (325). The narration ends with 'a feeling of purpose, of something achieved: 'After apartheid a resolution is not really possible until the people who wish to impose themselves on Africa violate some essential part of their being' (325). Thus, this is a great book with the specificity of details on the nature of African belief.

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