

Trotter Review

Volume 10
Issue 1 *Immigration, Ethnicity, and the Black
Community in the United States*

Article 12

6-21-1996

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Recommended Citation

Grayson, Sandra M. (1996) "Signs, Symbols, and Slave Culture: Representations in Black Thunder," *Trotter Review*. Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol10/iss1/12

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Signs, Symbols, and Slave Culture: Representations in *Black Thunder*

By Sandra M. Grayson

Black Thunder (1936), by Arna Bontemps, is a historical novel that recreates Gabriel Prosser's 1800 slave revolt. This novel is useful in reviewing some of the historical and cultural linkages between Black slaves in the U.S. and African cultures. Thematically, *Black Thunder* does more than represent Black people's self-assertion through revolt, it also shows their assertion of identity through practicing Atlantic (or western) African traditions, especially those of the Kongo. This is a topic that continues to be significant in light of greater contemporary political and economic linkages between U.S. Blacks and Africans, as well as increasing African immigration into the U.S. Black community.

Bontemps represented in fiction what Simon Brown, a former slave in Virginia, witnessed and experienced during the period. In the narrative "How the Slaves Helped Each Other," Brown explains how the slaves would come together like a family to help a sick member:

Women would come over just to sit a spell and sing and pray around the sickbed. Nobody was left to suffer alone. Sometimes a man or woman with a healing touch would brew an herb tea, mix a poultice, or apply peach tree leaves to a fevered brow, to help the sick get well. And all this loving care cheered up the troubled soul, whether he got well or died.¹

This coming together as family is represented in *Black Thunder* when Bundy, the slave who is savagely beaten nearly to death by his master, is on his death bed. The narrator describes how the slaves pray for Bundy's life:

Moonlight made shadows of uplifted arms on the wall above his heap of rags. There was a chorus of moaning voices. There were faces bowing to the earth and bodies swaying like barley. Oh, Lord, Lord-Lord...Knee-bent and body-bound, thy unworthy chilluns is crying in Egypt land...La-aawd, Lord...Wilt thou please, Oh, Massa Jesus, to look upon him what's lowly bowed and raise him up if it is thy holy and righteous will. Oh, La-aawd. La-aaaawd-Lord...²

Although Bundy dies shortly after this scene, he is not alone.

Bundy's funeral exemplifies the connection between Black folklore and Atlantic African beliefs in the novel.

As the funeral scene commences, the narrator emphasizes that "the Negroes remembered Africa in 1800."³ Hence, Africa is set up as a symbol of home and origin for the slaves before the funeral begins. The slaves perform an African burial to send Bundy to the land of the dead and to the slaves' ancestors and to ensure that his spirit will not haunt the living. In traditional African societies, the family members are obligated to perform the proper burial for their kin.⁴ In *Black Thunder*, the entire slave community assumes the responsibility, an assumption which indicates that the dead slave is a member of the larger slave family. The African burial symbolizes family and home for the members of the slave community as well as for Bundy, whose spirit is "squatting there beside that pile of dirt, squatting like a old grinning bullfrog on a bank,"⁵ while the burial rites are being performed.

A close reading of the scene shows that the burial is connected to Black folklore as well as to its origin in Atlantic African beliefs. These connections can be made by comparing aspects of the scene to descriptions in *Drums and Shadows*, a collection of Black folklore from the Georgia Sea Islands. During Bundy's funeral, the slaves leave food for his spirit:

Put a jug of rum at his feet [his favorite drink].
Roast a hog and put it on his grave...How
them victuals suit you, Bundy? How you like
what we brung you?⁶

This ritual is very close to practices explicated in *Drums and Shadows*. The following two examples, which also emphasize the need for the spirit to have food, highlight the similarities between this aspect of *Black Thunder* and folklore:

- [1.] Duh spirit is hungry jis lak duh pusson. Yuh hab tuh put food in duh ruhm fuh duh spirit tuh come and eat.⁷
- [2.] At duh fewnul, dey kills hawg an hab plenty tuh eat. Duh reason fuh dis is so dat sperrit hab plenty at duh las.⁸

In many Atlantic African cultures (such as Igbo, Yoruba, and Asante) during a traditional burial, food is left for the dead person's spirit so that the spirit will not be hungry on the journey to the land of the dead.

Other folkloric aspects of the burial scene in *Black Thunder* are the song and ritual movement or dance. During the funeral, the slaves

...raised a song without words. They were kneeling with their faces to the sun. Their hands were in the air, the fingers apart, and they bowed and rose together as they sang. Up came the song like a wave, and down went their faces in the dirt.⁹

Given the importance of the circle in many Atlantic African ceremonies, it is reasonable to speculate that the slaves are in a circle during the dance detailed in the

previous passage. Based on this premise, one can see the parallel between the burial practices in *Black Thunder* and those discussed in *Drums and Shadows* in which people form a circle or “ring” and move around the grave:

- [1.] Wen we hab a fewnul, we all mahch roun duh grabe in a ring. We shout an pray.¹⁰
- [2.] [An observer of a funeral from the “old days” remembered that] dey dance roun in a ring an dey motion wid duh hans. Dey sing duh body tuh duh grabe an den dey let it down an den dey succle roun in duh dance.¹¹

The reference to the motion of the hands and the singing in quotation [2] appears to be akin to the previous passage in *Black Thunder*. The slaves in the novel may even be singing the body to the grave as is the case in quotation [2].

That the mourners in *Black Thunder* have their “faces to the sun,” “the sun was far in the west,” and the word “sun” is repeated about five times in the scene—these phrases are also significant.¹² In reference to Africans and burial in *Drums and Shadows*, one person said that when an African dies his countryman sits up all night, and in the morning “he go out an pray tuh duh sun...”¹³ Robert Farris Thompson in *Four Moments of the Sun* pointed out that most rituals and initiations in the Kongo take the pattern of the circle of the sun about the earth:

The Kongo cosmogram mirrors the birth of a person, in the rising of the sun; the maximal power in a vertical line which culminates with the sun at noon; the death and decline in the lowering of the sun and its disappearance beneath the sea or earth.¹⁴

Given the relevance of the sun in the Kongo cosmogram and the importance of circles in many Atlantic African ceremonies, it seems clear that the sun (and looking toward the sun) is significant in the African burial detailed in *Black Thunder*. In Kongo terms, the reference to the sun signifies the life cycle. At the end of the scene, the sun is far in the west lowering and disappearing, movements which mean death and decline in the Kongo construct.¹⁵ Since the implication in the scene is that Bundy receives the proper burial, his spirit will join the dead ancestors.

Another Kongo influence in the scene is the mourners’ hand gestures. During the burial, “their hands were in the air, the fingers apart,” a *booka* gesture according to Thompson:

Booka refers to holding both hands above the head, fingers wide apart. The word refers to crying out for help, weeping, and proclaiming.¹⁶

Also of importance in this scene is the reference to Ben, an old slave owned by Mr. Moseley Sheppard, kneeling down (and joining the singing and moaning) “at the place where the two worlds meet.”¹⁷ The cemetery, in traditional Kongo belief, is

...a door (*mwelo*) between two worlds, a “threshold” marking the line between the two worlds, of the living and the dead, circumscribed by the cosmic journey of the sun.¹⁸

Furthermore, in the Kongo, “the graves were the principal medium through which the living communicated with the dead.”¹⁹ Hence, the reference in *Black Thunder* to where Ben kneels means that he kneels at the threshold where the world of the living and the world of the dead meet and shows the close connection that the living have with the dead in the novel.

Booka gestures, singing, and dancing are among the folkloric elements that come together in the burial scene in *Black Thunder* to reinforce the connection between Black folklore and African beliefs in the text. The novel represents Black people asserting themselves not only through revolt, but also through practicing Atlantic African traditions, actions which show the slaves as actors in history. Given the cultural detail that is intricately interwoven into *Black Thunder*, as well as the depth and richness of the text, it is curious that the novel “never enjoyed wide popularity.”²⁰ One may ponder if today’s readers of fiction are prepared to contemplate the theme of Black people’s assertion of an independent identity, or are they only prepared to accept the perpetuation of myth? This is a query that concerns many Blacks in the United States, as well as African immigrants in this country.

Notes

¹See *The Days When the Animals Talked* compiled by William J. Faulkner (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1977), 35.

²Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 33.

³*Ibid.*, 52.

⁴See the following texts as a starting place for additional information about traditional African burial practices as well as beliefs about the dead ancestors: Wande Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa* (Lagos: Unesco, 1975); Anne Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture* (New York: G.K. Hall and Company, 1992); Robert Farris Thompson, *Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Connecticut: Eastern Press, 1981).

⁵Bontemps, *Black Thunder*, 53.

⁶*Ibid.*, 52.

⁷Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadows* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986), 114.

⁸*Ibid.*, 160.

⁹Bontemps, *Black Thunder*, 52.

¹⁰Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 155.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 180.

¹²Bontemps, *Black Thunder*, 52-53.

¹³Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 106.

¹⁴Thompson, *Four Moments of the Sun*, 43.

¹⁵The four moments of the sun are dawn, noon, sunset, and midnight. When it is midnight in the world of the living, the sun is shining in the world of the dead. Thompson, *Four Moments of the Sun*, 27.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁷Bontemps, *Black Thunder*, 53.

¹⁸Thompson, *Four Moments of the Sun*, 27.

¹⁹Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo*, 11.

²⁰Arnold Rampersad, “Introduction to the 1992 Edition,” in Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder*, vii.

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