

MONIKA REIF-HUELSENER  
Universität Konstanz

***Reading V.S. Naipaul's Travelogue The Masque of Africa:  
Tradition, Religion, and Stereotypes***

**Keywords:** travelogue; Indian perspective on Africa; globalization; legacy of colonialism; plurality of religious beliefs, institutional and moral systems

**Abstract:**

Born in Trinidad in 1932, V.S. Naipaul has lived in England as a writer since 1950. His journey reports and cultural comments on Africa, India and the Caribbeans are among his most known, although controversial works. "For my journey report", says Naipaul, "I have always a theme". And this is also valid for his most recent book *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief* (2010), a report on a journey which also investigates the theme of religion in connection to the cultural-anthropological meaning of *Masque/mask* in Africa.

*Motto:* "The collective unconscious is not dependent on cerebral heredity; it is the result of what I shall call the unreflected imposition of a culture."

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*<sup>1</sup>

The "unreflected imposition of a culture" means for Frantz Fanon to unquestionably adopt traditionally established values of certain symbols and to act accordingly in a social context. Fanon's object of research is the paradigmatic 'negro': "In Europe, the Negro has one function: that of symbolizing the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul. In the collective unconscious of *homo occidentalis*, the Negro – or if one prefers, the color black – symbolizes evil, sin, wretchedness, death, war, famine." (BSWB, 190) What Fanon underlines here is the lack of interest on the side of power to question or challenge the stereotype as a major organizing principle in shaping negative images of African characters. Stereotypes are a powerful tool in the hand of self-interested parties.

When V.S. Naipaul undertakes one of his longer journeys that frequently last for six to seven months, he travels on a theme, as he says. The theme of his latest book *The Masque of Africa* (2010) raises a question, namely the question whether he as a traveller and an involved observer can discover effects of belief – in indigenous animism, the foreign religions of Christianity and Islam, the cults of leaders and mythical history – upon the process of civilization. In other words: are there significant changes in the process of civilization under the conditions of globalization? And did they happen in the time between 1966 and 2008, the dates of his two travels to Africa? How influential is the collective unconscious, of which Fanon speaks? And can it be changed or only tamed?

<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952), English translation by Charles Lam Markmann, New York, Grove Press, 1967, p. 191. [in the following text quoted as *BSWM*]

*The Masque of Africa* is dedicated to the theme of religion in Africa, revealing in particular how the author, as a traveller and as an outside observer, can sense “religion” or get “Glimpses of African Belief” – hence the subtitle of the book. The whole title is challenging in itself as it seems to suggest that there might be a close, yet veiled, connection between what Naipaul calls “The Masque” and the “Glimpses of African Belief.”

### **I. The scope of the paper**

In the following pages, I want to focus on the connection between *Masque* and *mask*, as well as on religious belief, and read Naipaul’s book in the light of some ideas of philosophical anthropology.

Naipaul’s interest in this travel book lies primarily in finding an answer to the question of how – under the premises of globalization – the continent has changed since his first travel along the same trajectory fifty years earlier. How would the lives, the ways of self-presentation of those African people he would have the chance to talk to have changed since then? How much are African people still influenced by the legacy of colonialism and the superimposition of Western forms of belief? How intensively did and do different religious beliefs interfere with each other? Did the cultural layers of the hegemonic powers – Britain, France, Portugal – choke the indigenous religions down so that their traces would be deformed beyond recognition?

Naipaul does not evoke the problems and hardships of everyday life in the countries he visits, or images of the struggle for survival. He must have seen them; but his approach to Africa is a more cultural one. The questions about the status of the human being in the world, the purpose and meaning of life are questions that find a rather sobering answer in view of the present living conditions of human people in most of the parts in Africa.

Helmuth Plessner is credited with the introduction of philosophical anthropology. One of his main ideas within this field was what in German is called the “excentric positionality of the human being as opposed to the non-human animals.” This excentric position holds that humans as organic beings take up a relationship to the borders of their existence – which in the first place are the limits of one’s own body. The socio-philosophical perspective based on Plessner’s philosophy demonstrates how humans strive to cope with their precarious border-situation. This border-situation opens their own realm of action; it is precarious because, by being open to themselves, it is open to the penetrating gaze of the other, as well. The consequence of the critical recognition of this border is to concede to each person the right, and at times the need, to wear marks and to create a public sphere based on tact and tactics. In such a public sphere lie the limits of collectivity, which is also the title of one of Plessner’s longer studies *Limits of Community* (*Grenzen der Gemeinschaft*, 1924). The excentric position of the human is also brought in language by the pithy sentence: “I am but I do not have myself”, meaning that we cannot live, act, think – and at the very same time reflect on our living, acting, thinking. The temporal condition of life and thought get into the way.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Helmuth Plessner (1972) „Die anthropologische Dimension der Geschichtlichkeit”, in *Sozialer Wandel. Zivilisation und Fortschritt als Kategorien der soziologischen Theorie*,

Or as Wolfgang Iser formulates it “We cannot be present to ourselves.”<sup>1</sup>

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, almost everything in the domain of systematic knowledge was understood as a branch of philosophy. “Physics, for example, was still known as ‘natural philosophy’, and the study of economics had developed as a part of ‘moral philosophy’.”<sup>2</sup> Back then, anthropology served more as a kind of review “of the implications for human nature of philosophically more central doctrines, and it may have incorporated a good deal of empirical material that would now be thought of as belonging to psychology.” One hundred years later, anthropology and a number of other disciplines emancipated themselves from philosophy, concentrated on evolutionary processes in the history of human beings, and on the study of social and cultural institutions and practices. Hence, anthropologists focused on less highly developed societies in order to be able to describe the growing role of institutional and moral systems.

If we look at the trajectory of literature from the 18<sup>th</sup> century up to the present, we discover a kind of companionship between contemporary philosophical anthropology and literature. We realize that the literary genre of travel writing, reports from travels into other i.e. “less highly developed countries” or stories of archaeologists about their findings in cultural historical sites meet a significantly raised interest with the reading public in Europe.

Travel writing, travelogues, reports from societies in faraway parts of the world have become favourite genres with readers in Europe, as they open a window on the variety of cultures, life styles, cultural practices and on “the human condition” in general – *La Condition humaine*, as André Malraux titled his novel from 1933.<sup>3</sup>

## II. Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul

V.S. Naipaul was born of Indian ancestry, in Trinidad, in 1932; he came to England on a scholarship in 1950, went four years at University College in Oxford, and then decided to become a full-fledged professional writer. He has two main preferences as a writer: travel books and autobiographically tinged texts. To say it in a more pointed way: whatever Naipaul writes – fiction, non-fiction, or travel books – he is, at the same time, subject and object of his texts.

In 1960, he began to travel and has written several travel books. Naipaul is no easy writer. His authorial attitudes shift from self-confidence to almost arrogance, from self-doubts to depressive breakdowns. There are critics and readers who think him to be the best English writer alive; some admire his keen and detailed gift of observation; others enjoy his mastery of the narrative voice when he shifts from a situation in the present to the past, establishing intertextual or cross literary links with the effect for the reader that temporal or spatial differences seem to be

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ed. Hans Peter Dreitzel, Neuwied, 160.

<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Iser, (1997/98) “The Significance of Fictionalizing”. (A Lecture for the Learned Societies Luncheon, given at Irvine on February 24, 1997). *Anthropoetics* III, no. 2 (Fall 1997 / Winter 1998).

<sup>2</sup> “philosophical anthropology”. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, 2011. Web. 09 Jul. 2011. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/456743/philosophical-anthropology>

<sup>3</sup> See also René Magritte’s painting with the same title, also 1933.

dissolved. For instance, in the chapter “Men Possessed”, Naipaul, while travelling in Ghana, describes his companion Kojo. The schoolmaster’s father (Kojo’s grandfather) was a palace chief, a senior adviser – on cultural matters – to the king. Kojo says he received a “special” African education:

‘My clan produces the kings of Ashanti. There are five other prominent chiefs who can also produce chiefs. But we, of the Oyoko clan, give the leadership on my maternal side.’ The famous Ashanti wars that gave Gold Coast and then Ghana its final shape took place in the 1890s. This would have provided Kojo’s grandfather with enough drama. But the big disturbance in Kojo’s life came with independence and especially with the dictatorship of Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana.<sup>1</sup> (MAAB, 154-155)

In such passages, we accompany the traveller on his journey, meet his acquaintances and learn about the history of the place by an involved speaker. Naipaul, the traveller, remains a distanced observer thus providing the reader with a multifaceted truth, even if he watches “possessed” men and women. In Kojo’s world, there are many deities, yet they all need human mediators called spokesmen, “who are high priests and prophetesses. They have to be initiated in the cults. Both the high priest and the prophetesses are possessed.” (MAAB, 162)

The dates of publication indicate that Naipaul writes his travel books not only “on a theme”; moreover, he repeats his visits at certain planned intervals, in order to see whether and how situations have changed. He exposes himself physically and mentally to his “obscure object of desire”, as one may call it in analogy to Luis Bunuel’s last film. He says that, with respect to religious practices and superstition, all African countries are alike. They may be individual and specific in many respects, but not when it comes to religion; he could not find any differences on his way from Uganda, to Ghana and Nigeria, the Ivory Coast and Gabon, not even in South Africa, the last station of his trip. “The Skyscrapers of Johannesburg didn’t rest on sand”, Naipaul observes. The other world “of magic felt fragile, but at the same time had an enduring quality”:

You felt it would survive any calamity. I had expected that over the great size of Africa the practices of magic would significantly vary. But they didn’t. The diviners everywhere wanted to ‘throw the bones’ to read the future and the idea of ‘energy’ remained a constant, to be tapped into by the ritual sacrifice of body parts. In South Africa body parts, mainly of animals, but also of men and women, made a mixture of ‘battle medicine’. To witness this, to be given some idea of its power, was to be taken far back to the beginning of things. To reach that beginning was the purpose of my book.<sup>2</sup>

Going back to the beginnings also refers to the fact that, in ancient times, the ritual of “throwing bones” also existed as a magical practice. It served to predict the outcome of a war, for instance. The captivating aspect for a literary critic is, of

<sup>1</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief*, London, Picador, 2010 [in the following text quoted as MAAB].

<sup>2</sup> See cover text written by V.S. Naipaul for the Picador edition of his book *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief* (mentioned in the reference above).

course, that that the intestines of the birds, or bones, or whatever animal had to be interpreted – like literary texts. The signs did not endow themselves with meaning, like in language. It needed the reader and interpreter to elicit the secret message from the arrangement of body parts.

What Naipaul experiences here and what he describes as “the magic ... that had an enduring quality” can be felt particularly when travellers walk over South African markets. In Soweto, for instance, there is a huge modern building including a clinic for general medicine, situated right next to the market, where the “body parts”, “the mixtures” for all kinds of ailments, including HIV/Aids, the sombre huts of the traditional healers have their ancestral place. Everything is on open display. Strolling over these markets, we can feel what Naipaul must mean when he writes about the “power” these places send forth and the being “taken far back to the beginning of things.” (see the quote above)

The book Naipaul wrote just before his *Masque of Africa* is again about writing and the position of the writer in society, the book significantly bearing the title *A Writer's People: Ways of Looking and Feeling* (2007). Hence, “looking” is not just perceiving, but an act of taking the world “in” and connect its image with our reservoir of emotion. Apart from the self-reference to his own position as an author and critic<sup>1</sup>, he highlights the act of creating a world with words.

### III. Festivities of *The Masque*

In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Masque was a form of festive entertainment especially at the European courts. Developed in Italy, since the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, as *intermedio*<sup>2</sup>, the Masque involved music and dancing, singing and acting, within an elaborate stage design. The props and costumes were sometimes designed by a renowned artist, as a homage paid to the patron. Professional actors and musicians were hired for the speaking and singing parts. Often, the maskers who did not speak or sing were courtiers: King James I's Queen Consort, Anne of Denmark, frequently danced with her ladies, in masques, between 1603 and 1611.

As shown in the chapter on the English Renaissance in *A Literary History of England*<sup>3</sup>, the masque was considered the most important semi-dramatic spectacle

<sup>1</sup> V. S. Naipaul was knighted in 1989. He was awarded many prizes, including the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 2001. He holds honorary doctorates from Cambridge University and Columbia University in New York, and honorary degrees from the universities of Cambridge, London and Oxford.

<sup>2</sup> The *intermedio* or *intermezzo* was a theatrical performance or spectacle with music, dance, which was performed between the acts of a play, to celebrate special occasions in Italian courts. It was one of the important predecessors to the opera and an influence on the English court Masque. Particularly developed in Florence and Ferrara around the rise of the Medici family. *Intermedi* were written and performed from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century through the 17<sup>th</sup>, although the peak of this genre was in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. After 1600, the form either merged with the opera, or continued to be performed between the acts of operas.

<sup>3</sup> *A Literary History of England*. Ed. Albert C. Baugh, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967; here: Book II “The Renaissance (1500-1660)” by Tucker Brooke and Matthias A. Shaaber, p. 569.

and entertainment of the time, aristocratic and popular alike. There are records of “mummings” and “disguises” at the English court from the period of Edward III. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, there were “royal entries” into London and other cities and other similar pageants for the reception of distinguished personages. These were stationary or processional, more or less allegorical in theme, accompanied by music, and either pantomimic or with dialogue, though speech was quite secondary to spectacle. The term *mumming* is significant. Of festivities at the court, there are abundant records from the time of Henry VIII. During the dance, maskers – noblemen and gentlemen (and on a famous occasion King Henry himself) – chose partners from among the spectators. This intermingling of actors and guests became an established convention. The festivities could be very costly, but they could also be brought down to as low costs as possible, if the King or the Queen became aware of the expenses connected with the event. In Edmund Spenser’s unfinished epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (in two parts: 1590 and 1596), there are episodes in which the atmosphere comes to its full flowering at the extravagant court of James I (and extravagant it remained through the reign of Charles I).

The author of the Renaissance-chapter in *A Literary History of England* warns the “modern reader” who might have difficulties with this genre, having “before him only the prose synopses of the action and the dry descriptions of the scenes and costumes and movement to supplement the texts”. He must “reconstruct in his imagination the gorgeousness of the occasions.”<sup>1</sup>

The origins of such festivities, however, lie in the dark. Their roots have been sought deep in the past, in folk-customs, fertility rites, magic, initiation rituals, forms of evocation, dance performances in particular. Here certainly lies the inspirational source for Naipaul’s title *The Masque of Africa*. And here, in Africa, which is called the “Cradle of Mankind”, Naipaul found those initiation rites which would take him “far back to the beginning of things. To reach that beginning was the purpose” of his book on “glimpses of African belief”.

#### IV. Politics of the Mask

The writer who dealt most intensively with masks and their social / racial function is the theorist and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon. Fanon was born in Martinique in 1925. He came from a well-to-do black bourgeois family who could afford the fees for the Lycée Schoelcher, then the most prestigious high school in Martinique, where the writer Aimé Césaire was one of his teachers. After the Vichy government in France had turned to support the Nazis in 1940, French naval troops were blockaded on Martinique. Forced to remain on the island, French soldiers enforced racist behaviour and accusations of harassment and sexual misconduct arose. Fanon, confronted with these events as a young man, developed feelings of alienation and heightened his disgust with colonial racism. At the age of eighteen, Fanon fled the island as a “dissident” (the coined word for French West Indians joining Gaullist forces) and travelled to British-controlled Dominica to join the resistance movement against Vichy. In 1945, after a kind of Odyssey through the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

French military hierarchy, he was wounded, decorated with the *Croix de Guerre* medal, then transferred to Normandy with other Caribbean soldiers, in order to await repatriation.

In Martinique, he worked for the parliamentary campaign of his friend and mentor Aimé Césaire, who was a major influence in his life. After his baccalaureate, Fanon went to France where he studied medicine and psychiatry. During his medicine studies, he also attended Maurice Merleau-Ponty's lectures and thus got acquainted with philosophical schools. He was influenced in particular by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach to issues relating to knowledge, politics, the possibility to influence the course of history, and the place of the subject in the world.

Looking at this outline of Frantz Fanon's short life, we may state that he absolutely knew what he was writing about when he conceived *Black Skin White Masks* [in the ensuing discussion BSWM]. His battle against racism continued and his political and intellectual legacy was completed later, with another book, written shortly before his death in 1961, under the title *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>1</sup>

This biographical sketch also serves to contextualize Fanon's ideas in the philosophical and sociological context of his time. He was a contemporary of the existentialist philosophers; Jean-Paul Sartre wrote a preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, whose tone and provocative style should intensify the message of the book.

The main thesis and plea in *Black Skin White Masks* is, of course, targeting the dis-respect and non-recognition of the "Other defined as other" in a tautly organized power differential, where the borderline between inside and outside is rigid, meaning non-negotiable. According to Aimé Césaire, the only possibility black or mixed Caribbean people under French colonialism had, was to put on a mask in order to support the illusion of their being "sound" people and, at the same time, hide their split personality. Around the same time, the Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing saw the danger of madness and mental insanity looming behind such a mask of "normality", which he called "Divided Self"<sup>2</sup>. Aimée Césaire described his own experience of Martinique education as one "which associated in our minds the word France and the word liberty, and that bound us to France by every fibre of our hearts and every power of our minds."<sup>3</sup> These strong and deeply ingrained feelings had the effect that Martinique intellectuals identified with the value system of the colonial power and hence came quickly in conflict with their genuine desires and their need of belonging.

Apart from being an emotionally intense introduction into the psychic situation of "the Negro", as Fanon calls him, in a predominantly white society, Fanon's much quoted book *Black Skin White Masks* is a document for the social and psychic function of "masks". Wearing a mask – or, as it is sometimes called by sociologists, "playing a role" – can facilitate contact with others by offering a

<sup>1</sup> Cf. here Merleau-Ponty's influential studies on *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1969).

<sup>2</sup> Ronald D. Laing (1960) *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, Harmondsworth.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Stuart Hall (1995) „Negotiating Caribbean Identities,” *New Left Review* 209; 3-14.

defined platform of interaction and the recognition of mutual interest. As we can never expose the whole structure of our personality in one instant of contact, we have to “interpret” the other, his or her ways of self-staging, of “masquing” – to put it in Naipaul’s words – and try to decipher it according to the “stage directions” we receive from our counterpart. The sociologist Erving Goffman analyzed these strategies in his study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, where he argued that, in order to ascribe meaning to social action, we first have to analyze the given framework in which the action is supposed to take place.<sup>1</sup> This links back to what Plessner had in mind with the metaphor of the “excentric positionality”.

Fanon chimes in by arguing that, in processes of recognition, the other has always to be taken into account with the assumed same strategies and projections that we ourselves produce. Recognition is always reciprocal; quoting Hegel, Fanon sustains that “Action from one side only would be useless, because what is to happen can only be brought about by means of both ...*they recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other.*” (BSWM, 217) Personal interaction involves *desire*, and “desire” is, per se, outward- or other-directed. “As soon as I *desire* I am asking to be considered,” Fanon states. With Hegel in mind, we might add that this sentence implies the promise to lift the masks and empathically consider the other’s very same “desire”.<sup>2</sup>

In order to gain self-esteem and the courage for self-definition despite being excluded from the official norm and from the inner circle of society, it is not sufficient just “to educate” the coloured part of the population, “but to teach the Negro not to be the slave of their archetypes” (BSWM, 35), Fanon writes.

The philosophical debate about self-consciousness, in particular Hegel’s part, does focus neither on the body as the locus of stored memory and pain, nor on the intimate interrelationship between body and consciousness. For Fanon’s “negro”, this is an important issue, because being defined as *significantly* other refers to the physical appearance, the body being the *sign* for and of otherness. “Significantly” is an *unmasking* expression in this context. Masks can be put on and off, they can be changed, as we have seen earlier, at the will of the one who is choosing the mask.

A particularly intriguing paradigm for the masking / unmasking dialectic is the *Minstrel Show*, introduced in the USA in 1830. Minstrel shows emerged from preindustrial European traditions of masking and carnival. But in the US, they began in the 1830s, with working class white men dressing up as plantation slaves. These men imitated black musical and dance forms in a savage parody of black Americans. Since the 1800s, the Abolitionist Movement in America and in England intensified, its activists claimed recognition of black slaves as human beings and hence the immediate abolition of slavery. It was in 1830 that the slave trade was forbidden in the British Empire and, as it continued to be practised illegally, when discovered, was sued as a crime. The Minstrel Show therefore had strong political

<sup>1</sup> See Erving Goffman (1959) *The presentation of self in everyday life*, New York.

<sup>2</sup> Hegel’s argument in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, on which Fanon draws, is quoted in Fanon’s chapter “The Negro and Hegel” (BSWM, 216-222) and reads as follows: “Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or recognized.”



and social implications when played by white lower class Americans who slipped into the mask of black Americans, ridiculing them sarcastically. Before the Civil War, black actors were not allowed to take part in those shows; towards the turn of the century, however, a kind of “cross-masking” took place when black players and dancers painted their faces white, thus giving back the parodistically masked humiliation they earlier received from their former “masters”.

The traditional Minstrel Show had three stock characters: “Jim Crow” was the stereotypical carefree slave, “Mr. Tambo” a joyous but lumbering musician, and “Zip Coon” a free black attempting to “put on airs” or rise above his station. These stereotypical characters condensed and mirrored the prejudices on both sides, exposing at the same time the problematic “dark” side of mutuality, as well as the pitfall of Hegel’s metaphor of reciprocity in recognition.

The Minstrel Show does not only mask the faces of the actors. As there is dancing, singing, gestures and bodily language copied according to the image employed, the whole body is involved. Merleau-Ponty reminds us of the central status of the body in connection with consciousness, self-consciousness and the desire for recognition. Fanon quotes<sup>1</sup>: “There are times when the black man is locked into his body. Now for a being who has acquired consciousness of himself and of his body, who has attained to the dialectic of subject and object, the body is no longer a cause of the structure of consciousness, it has become an object of consciousness.” It is this externalization of consciousness, the disentangling of the self from mutual prejudicial projections, which opens the possibility of intervening with the historical process. There is no “white history” as there is no “white world”, no “white ethic”, any more than there is a “white intelligence”. “I should constantly remind myself that the real *leap* consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.” (BSWM, 228-229) This self-creation could be described by the metaphor of “testing and changing masks” which are not other-dictated or other-determined, but solely chosen according to the subject-willed construction of the frame of existence.

To summarize this part, we Human beings wear masks in order to hide our faces but also to signal that what can be seen is only one version of the self. The self is the individual behind the mask, but it is also the individual that makes the decision about which mask to wear. Here Fanon’s observation applies that “As soon as I *desire* I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness, I am for somewhere else and for something else.” (BSWM, 218)

### **V. V. S. Naipaul’s *Glimpses of African Belief through The Masque of Africa***

Naipaul’s title implies all the afore discussed versions of the Masque and the mask. The traditional rituals, the belief of the people he meets on his journey through Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, the Ivory Coast, Gabon and South Africa. I mention the countries here again just to remind us of the geographical dimension, not to mention the political differences among those countries. These differences

<sup>1</sup> From Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

are mentioned, but do not flow into Naipaul's description of the physical and the spiritual life he discovers and the narratives he hears from the people he meets.

I will not read in detail the stories of all the countries that Naipaul presents; much rather there will be focus on the themes of history, memory, tradition, and religion.

During his first stop close to Kampala, he learns the story of "The Tomb at Kasubi", now a UNESCO Cultural Heritage Site. The narrator Naipaul makes the 19<sup>th</sup> century kings and religious leaders as well as their enemies come alive by inquiring into the history of the royal families, and shows how the relationship of Uganda with its neighbouring countries is impregnated by this history. The last representative he mentions was Mutesa who died in 1884 and "was being buried in the tomb of Kasubi, which he had modelled on the tomb of his father Sunna at Wamala." "He was indeed like his father," Naipaul reports and comments: "The country had given him no other model." (MAAB, 28)

Regarding the cruel punishment of enemies that is registered by collective memory as the main characteristic of Sunna and Mutesa, Naipaul comments:

So Amin and Obote have a kind of ancestry: The British colonial period, with law and without local wars, has to be seen as an interlude. But how do Africans live with their African history? Perhaps the absence of script and written records blurs the past; perhaps the oral story gives them only myths. (MAAB, 28)

Naipaul's seemingly innocent question reminds one of Hegel's arguments in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. There he speaks of the character of the "negroes", calls them "boisterous" ("unbändig") and resistant to any kind of development. "As we see them today this is as they have always been" ("Dieser Zustand ist keiner Entwicklung und Bildung fähig, und wie wir sie heut sehen, so sind sie immer gewesen").<sup>1</sup> And he continues: „what we really understand under Africa is the continent without history, the not yet opened up, caught in the natural spirit and just on the threshold of history." ("was wir eigentlich untr Afrika verstehen, das ist das Geschichtslose und Unaufgeschlossene, das noch ganz im natürlichen Geiste befangen ist, und das hier bloß an der Schwelle der Weltgeschichte vorgeführt werden muss"). It seems as if Naipaul's image of Africa is, at times, not so different from Hegel's.

In his talks with Africans he comes again and again on the theme of witchcraft. Sometimes the police is involved. When they find a gathering in some marketplace, they tend to dissipate people so that they might not cause any riot. Naipaul witnesses several such occasions and concludes: "Witchcraft is not a joke to these people. They cannot laugh at what they fear." (MAAB, 56) Remarks like these make Naipaul a biased observer. I wonder who would really be able to laugh at what he or she fears; this is not a question of African superstition, I tend to think.

Landing on his visit in Nigeria, he encounters a situation not so unlike the one just described. At the airport he falls for a clever taxi driver who is not the one ordered for

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from the German edition; *my translation*. G.F.W. Hegel (1971) *Sämtliche Werke*. Bd. 11. *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*; here: „Geographische Grundlagen der Weltgeschichte“, Stuttgart, p. 145.

him. At his hotel, he receives a phone call and at the other end of the line there is a furious taxi driver who blames him to have cheated. At the same time, Naipaul sees a card on the table of his hotel room “warning clients about this sort of thing, urging every kind of precaution before stepping into a taxi.” “I felt then,” Naipaul says gratefully, “that I had had the luck of the innocent – it does exist: it has looked after me for all of my travelling life – and that, whatever was to come later, this luck had brought me to the hotel.” (MAAB, 86) Is there a vague irony in his pondering?

On his first tour through Lagos, he sees, in an open lobby, a striking sight which turns the narrative into an ekphrasis.

An attractive and mysterious sculpture: African, but realistic, and not apparently magical: a life-size figure of a veiled man in a high hat, and in a long coat, holding a thick stick. The hat, like a top hat, and the coat, like a Victorian frock-coat, gave an odd touch of Europe to the figure. The veil was reticulated, and kept in place on the forehead by the hat, so that it was a little away from the face. There was a smaller version of the sculpture in the office area of the new building, and there was a version, in pale-blue shadow, on some of the hotel stationary. (MAAB, 87)

The perception of this sculpture triggers the viewer’s reflection on the receptive structure of human consciousness. This reflection comes so spontaneous and unexpected that we, as readers, are involuntarily drawn into the process.

... there are many levels of consciousness at any given moment and perhaps it will be like that at the moment of death itself, even if it is painful – I had noticed, in spite of the anxiety, which was uppermost, and in spite of the fatigue after fourteen or fifteen hours of travel ... (MAAB, 87)

Naipaul describes in this passage what James Joyce would have called an “epiphanic moment”, what Virginia Woolf expressed with “moment of vision”. In such moments of sudden insight, boundaries can be transgressed, limits can be pushed, knowledge that usually is not present but flash up in the mind like lightning, as Walter Benjamin described the process of memory.<sup>1</sup>

On his strolls through the capital, he saw that figure in various forms several times, so that he inferred that the motif is well known, used in various contexts. To his question about meaning, however, no one could give reliable information. The answers he received were as enigmatic as the figure itself. He was told that it was emblematic of Lagos and that it was a figure of masquerade. His research led him to another travel book *Travels in the Interior of Africa* by Mungo Park (1771-1806). More than two hundred years before, he had travelled in the part of Africa in which Naipaul moved.

After extended inquiries about the identity and the symbolic implications of that mysterious figure, Naipaul learned that it carried the name *Mumbo Jumbo*. The expression denotes a confusing or meaningless subject of belief in some phenomenon, “non-existent” – such as ghosts, apparitions, presentiments, and the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin (1955) *Selected Essays*. (dt. *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften I*, „Über den Begriff der Geschichte“: „Das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit huscht vorbei. Nur als Bild, das auf Nimmerwiedersehen im Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit eben aufblitzt, ist die Vergangenheit festzuhalten.“, Frankfurt a.M., p. 253.

like. It can also refer to rituals of a religion that the speaker does not believe in or does not understand the language they are performed in. "Language", in this context, can also mean other sorts of expression possessing some kind of rhythm or structure, but does not convey meaning in the usual sense. One might also say, if there is meaning, it cannot be grasped through the usual channels of communication by appealing to our receptive faculties, such as feeling, emotion, empathy or our cognitive apparatus.

Naipaul spins a narrative around the figure and starts with a husband that has unsolvable trouble with one of his wives. In order to reintroduce peace in his household, he might call upon Mumbo Jumbo.

He might act the part of Mumbo Jumbo himself, or he might call upon someone he could trust. Just before dark one day, Mumbo Jumbo would begin to scream in the forest outside the village in a most fearful way. This terrible screaming would tell the people in the village that Mumbo Jumbo was coming; and when it is dark Mumbo Jumbo does come with his strange disguise, his stick and high hat, his veiled face and his long coat. (MAAB, 89)

Mumbo walks through the village, over the market place where everyone gathered, picks out the offending woman and renders her to punishment. "She is stripped naked, tied to a post, and flogged until dawn by Mumbo Jumbo with his stick. The villagers shout with pleasure; they mock the woman and show her no mercy."

Africa is no longer polygamous, Naipaul states. "Africa, away from its Muslim segment, thinks of itself as Christian, even if ancient currents of thought and belief and custom flow below."

Situations and reflexions like these have a double impact on Naipaul, the writer, and Naipaul, the man. On the one hand, he is fascinated by the idea that there still are these "ancient currents" flowing under the cultural surface of Western civilization, technology, economy, etc. It might remind him of his own Trinidadian memory, when England was for him the Promised Land. That not everything was as he had expected after his arrival and during his first years in England shows very clearly in the autobiographical sections of his early novels, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, for instance. In 2008, when he follows approximately the same route he had taken in 1966, he is curious to see how the countries have changed. He is the traveller who considers himself a distant observer and renderer of the "real" situation; on the other hand, he cannot but ask curiously what might be hidden underneath the stories he is told, behind the Masque Africa seems to put on for him. On his journey, he also undergoes a journey into his own cultural memory, which becomes alive when he remembers books he read long time ago, books with stories about the region, books about religious practices he can witness now in person, or when he remembers Trinidad. This is the only time in the book when Naipaul turns to the personal pronoun "we".

Confronted with a general view on Trinidad from non-Trinidadians but immigrated Africans, he states that in Trinidad the differentiation of various origins of coloured people was much easier than in Nigeria. "In Trinidad we had overcome some of the effects of history. We had a distinguished group of black professionals;

their children reflected the confidence of their parents. We were able, without trouble, to distinguish these people from the general black population. Black and ordinary, black and distinguished: we carried the two ideas in our head, and it could even be said that their blackness added to the distinction of the distinguished.” Passages like these sound very self-righteous, so as if he had a clear cut frame of evaluating other people. His own *Masque* shows in these words when he presents himself as an unreliable narrator who does not check the uneasy ethical implications of his language.

He remembers that he had come across the expression *Mambo Jambo* when he read Mungo Park’s travelogue *Travels in the Interior of Africa*. Park’s travel report reaches almost as far down as Naipaul’s travel in Nigeria; he had liked the book

but (as with so many books that are part of one’s education) had forgotten much of the detail, preserving from that reading only an idea of dust and cruelty and deprivation, the writer’s deprivation and the deprivation of his companions, mostly African slave merchants driving their chained-up slaves from the interior, taking them in sickness and half health and on half diet, all of five hundred miles to the coast, to be sold into the holds of Atlantic ships (*MAAB*, 87-88).

The origins of Mambo Jambo are not totally clear. Perhaps it originated from the Mandingoname *Maamajombo*, a masked dancer that took part in religious ceremonies. Park’s travel journal describes “Mumbo Jumbo” as a character, complete with “masquerade habit”.

According to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, “*Mumbo Jumbo* is a noun and is the name of a grotesque idol said to have been worshipped by some tribes. In its figurative sense, *Mambo Jumbo* is an object of senseless veneration or a meaningless ritual.” Western usage of the term may have formerly carried a degree of racial stereotyping, evoking the casually racist belief in the gullibility of the supposedly childlike Africans, see Hegel and others in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was widely held when this term was coined. In the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Mambo Jambo is represented as a “magician who makes the troubled spirits of ancestors go away”.<sup>1</sup>

## VI. Mumbo Jumbo

This whole Mumbo Jumbo episode establishes the link, in my argument, to the European forms of the Masque, described in part III of this paper.

A writer who deals extensively with Mumbo Jumbo is Ishmael Reed, who has written a novel with the same title. It is a biting, satiric deconstruction of Western civilization, a racy and uproarious commentary on our society. In it, Reed, one of our preeminent African-American authors, mixes portraits of historical figures and fictional characters with satiric commentary on issues ranging from ragtime to Greek philosophy. Even Harold Bloom cites Reed’s novel as one of the five hundred most significant books in the Western canon.<sup>2</sup> There is no argumentation in Bloom’s book

<sup>1</sup> Quotes from Ismael Reed (1972) *Mumbo Jumbo*, New York, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom (1994) *The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages*; in particular the chapter “D. The Chaotic Age: A Canonical Prophecy”, New York / London, p. 565.

for this decision, but *Mumbo Jumbo* ranges in the same section with Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon or Cynthia Ozick. *Mumbo Jumbo* is the counterpart to the European *Masque* we discussed in the first part of this essay.

As Reed's first work, *Mumbo Jumbo* achieved wide notoriety, and it is considered by several scholars to be his best achievement. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a mythic / magic epic centred in places like New Orleans and Harlem during the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. The story depicts the struggle between *Jes Grew*, the black cultural impulse, and Western monotheistic tradition, which Reed calls the *Atonists*. Reed incorporates illustrations, footnotes and bibliographies in parody of the documentary conventions of black realism. The dust jacket for *Mumbo Jumbo* was designed by Reed and Allen Weinberg. At times, the narrative reminds one of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, or Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or *The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*.

The last section of Naipaul's book deals with the last station of his journey, which is South Africa. When we follow his narrative, we get the impression that he went down to *South Africa* and did not find *Africa* any more. There was nothing of the *Masque*, of *Mumbo Jumbo*, of dancing or singing, no religious rituals that could have been said to form an undercurrent of the visible and official religious practices of the big confessions.

The most moving, yet also most distressing narrative in the whole book is about his meeting with Mrs. Mandela. Naipaul had arranged for a conversation with Winnie Mandela, Nelson Mandela's wife. When Naipaul enters the house in order to wait for Mrs. Mandela, he finds enough time to look around and comment on the interior. There were private photographs and artefacts, which assumedly were gifts. There was nothing private or personal about the house, only the strong presence of the absent Nelson Mandela. When she speaks, she seems to Naipaul still full of political passion, "still close to the fears she felt in the bad times." (*MAAB*, 315) The name Mandela meant "imprisonment and interrogation", she said: "This was a period where people vanished or were killed by the security forces for being members of the ANC." When it comes to her own imprisonment, she just comments it with: "When you undergo every possible humiliation or torture there is nothing left. You lose all fear." One night, she was forced in a van and banished to a desolate place for nine years. Then she says the sentence that makes the Mandela-story so sad; she said: "You must remember that the Mandela who went in – went in: went to jail – was a revolutionary, and the Mandela who came out was preaching peace and compromise. ... The way to dilute a person is to commercialise him, and they have." Also the freedom they seemed to have gained, was "compromised" freedom. She continues:

I feel that we were short-changed. It was a freedom based on compromises and concessions, and that is what Mandela accepted. Black economic empowerment is a joke. It was white confidence measure made up by local white capitalists. The 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. (*MAAB*, 316-317)

There it is, again, Fanon's "collective unconscious" which results of the unreflected imposition of a culture. In these few sentences, the whole tragic history of South Africa between 1990 and 2010 is enwrapped. What should have become a transition movement generating hope and justice for all South Africans, turned into "some sort of religious confession" play. "... peace throws up heroes like Tutu."

Asked by Naipaul how much had survived in her of her tribal Xhosa culture, her reply comes passionate and serious:

I am defined by my culture and I know that I am from Xhosa land. I know that I am an African, and we know what to do from our grandmothers. The advent of European culture has affected our people, but our men still go to initiation schools. ... If something is not going well for my children or grandchildren, I will go home to the graves of my ancestors and ask them for their help. We believe that the ancestor works with God. (*MAAB*, 318)

With this "confession", Naipaul received the answer to the questions which he had been looking for, during his travels. The original indigenous beliefs were there, they were still alive and active for the individual and her or his decisions. The forms of belief had undergone transformation – as had the form of their appearance: as the Masque of Africa.