



Genesis and Survival in Mumbo Jumbo (1972) by Ishmael Reed

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Abstract - This research paper displays an account for the origin of the black cultural heritage in America. It pinpoints the circumstances under which the black culture emerges in America and how it manages to survive to this day. Known as Neo-hoodooism, it is a history of religion. This history of religion started in Ancient Egypt. Through this religion, Ishmael Reed retraces the history of the Blacks' back to Ancient Egypt to examine the genesis of the Blacks' culture.

Keywords : genesis, culture, reinterpretation, neo-hoodooism, survival.

Résumé - Ce papier retrace l'origine de l'héritage culturel noir en Amérique. Il met en évidence les circonstances dans lesquelles la culture noire émerge en Amérique et comment elle parvient à survivre jusqu'aujourd'hui. Connue sous le nom de Neo-hoodooisme, il s'agit d'une histoire de religion. Cette histoire de la religion a commencé en Égypte ancienne. À travers cette religion, Ishmael Reed retrace l'histoire des noirs jusqu'à l'Égypte ancienne pour déterminer l'origine de la culture noire.

Mots Clés : genèse, culture, réinterprétation, Neo-hoodooisme, survie.

INTRODUCTION

In the twentieth century Afro-American fiction was mostly dominated by writers such as Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston. The latter one developed a literature in which the target is essentially based on the production of realistic portrayals of Blacks' lives in a nation where socio-cultural realities expose unexpected ups and downs. This social realism of hers intensively highlighted in black literature is strengthened by Richard Wright in *Native Son* (1940) and later on by James Baldwin to name but a few. Unlike these writers, Ishmael Reed was inspired by Ernest J. Gaines, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison. As these writers, Ishmael talks about the Blacks' living conditions, racism, abusing men and single mother family. He is a vigorous defender of the black culture. That is why Ishmael Reed finds monoculturalism so rigid. According to Ishmael Reed, it is unacceptable to promote monoculturalism in a country like the United States of America where people come from different backgrounds. In terms of cultural and religious beliefs, everybody should be given the opportunity to choose what he/she desires. Let's draw our attention on the fact that in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), the central thesis turns around the two following ideas: multiculturalism and monoculturalism. What is important to know is who are favorable to multiculturalism and who are in favor of monoculturalism? What is

the philosophy which lays under the two concepts? The fight that started in Ancient Egypt between Osiris and Set is going to be kept on in America. But before providing further details, we shall precise that the history of religion which started in Ancient Egypt is not for granted. Ishmael Reed chooses Ancient Egypt to explain his reader about the mysteries of Prince Osiris, Jes Grew. Jes Grew, the black cultural heritage, is Prince Osiris religion brought in America by the slave trade. These mysteries of Prince Osiris tell the history of Ancient Egypt. What are the circumstances under which the Osirian mysteries emerge in America? Can Jes Grew's emergence in America be associated with the survival of the black culture? Isn't Reed's notion of genesis closer to the origin of the Blacks in terms of culture? These questions raise awareness of many great thinkers such as Richard J. Powell, Toni Morrison, Henry Ossawa Tanner. One of the most distinguished men is Richard J. Powell. In his *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (1997), he writes:

There were a few nineteenth-century thinkers who took a position that might be described as "Pan-Africanist" or "black nationalist" for them, the same historical "facts" - the shared African origin, the social dissolution which afflicted African people's though the transatlantic slave trade¹

Richard J. Powell is joined in such a way the notion of the black cultural origin becomes a major concern. It catches the attention of many French novelists and American writers as well. The most famous figures are Guy de Maupassant, Emile Zola, Henry James, Stephane Crane and Theodore Dreiser to name but a few. These writers are followed by some American visual artists such as Thomas Hovenden, Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer, and Henry Ossawa Tanner. Together, they produced a body of literature which challenged "*the prevailing assumption of black inferiority, shallowness, and bestiality*"² All these thinkers have gone through the problematic about the black culture's emergence and its status in America. Unlike them, Ishmael goes further by questioning the origin of the black cultural heritage. By asserting the fatherhood of Afro-American culture back to ancient Egypt, Ishmael Reed aims at deconstructing the former institutions such as racism, Jim Crow System, segregation and discrimination. Therefore, this paper owes its relevance to the discussion on the emergence of the black culture (Jes Grew) in twentieth century America and how it tries to survive in a racist society like America.

This research paper is done through online search and library search. First of all, I went to Cheikh Anta Diop central library. And then, to the West African

¹ Richard J. Powell, 1997, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century*, p: 24.

²Richard, J. Powell, *op. cit*, p: 26



Research Center where I found one of Ishmael Reed's works about the status of the black culture in America in the twentieth century, *Writin' is Fightin'* (1988). This book is about the life of the black male living in America in the twentieth century. I also used Google and JSTOR and some academic websites such as Google Scholar and Waves where I found details about black aesthetics and Ishmael Reed's deconstructing style. This is why, when dealing with Ishmael Reed, it is advisable to use a postmodern approach. In all his work, the notion of deconstruction³ is very recurrent. It is the tool he uses to reinterpret the history of the black origin in terms of culture.

In this perspective, the first part of this paper focuses on the history of the Black's origin. This part will be exemplified by the history of Neo-hoodooism. The second part is all about the challenge to reinterpret the true history of the Blacks. It focuses on particular book edited and published by Ishmael Reed, *Before Columbus Foundation* (1992). Then this article turns around two main parts: firstly, Jes Grew: the history of the Blacks' origin, secondly, Reed's reinterpretation of the true history of the Blacks.

1. Jes Grew: the history of the Blacks' Origin

In *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), the history of Jes Grew is told in a black point of view to magnify the circumstances under which the black cultural heritage emerges in American. In the book, it is called voodoo or Neo-hoodooism.

1.1. Neo-hoodooism: a black faith

One cannot talk about *Genesis and Survival* in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) without mentioning the notion of Neo-hoodooism. According to Thesaurus Encyclopedia, Neo Hoodooism is a "magic healing and control, especially in African-based folk medicine in the United States and Caribbean». Another definition by Thesaurus: hoodooism is "a religious cult practiced chiefly in Caribbean countries (especially Haiti); involves witchcraft and animalistic deities". Hoodooism is also "a system of religious beliefs and rituals; devoted to the culture of the blessed virgin."⁴ Briefly, Neo-hoodooism is the black faith upon which Ishmael Reed discusses ethnic culture in the United States of America. It is a tool he uses to describe the black American cultural heritage within the American mainstream popular

³ Theorized by French philosopher Jean Jacques Derrida, deconstruction is a postmodern device used by postmodern writers. In black literature, keys figures are Toni Morrison and Ishmael Reed to name but a few. Deconstruction theory transcends philosophy and is used in literary criticism, social sciences, aesthetics, psychoanalysis, and other areas of study. From: [https://study.com/learn/lesson/jean-jacques-derrida-philosophy-overview.html#:~:text=jean%20Jacques%20Derrida%20is%20the,groundwork%20for%20Derrida's%20deconstruction%20definition](https://study.com/learn/lesson/jean-jacques-derrida-philosophy-overview.html#:~:text=jean%20Jacques%20Derrida%20is%20the,groundwork%20for%20Derrida's%20deconstruction%20definition.). Seen July 4th, 2024 at 16:11pm.

⁴ <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/hoodooism>. Seen May 10th, 2021 at 23:35pm.



culture. As a matter of consequence, Ishmael Reed's notions of Genesis and survival can be associated with the circumstances under which Neo-hoodooism emerges in America. As a cultural background, Ishmael Reed uses it to retrace the origins of the black people living abroad and particularly in America. He believes that every nation has culturally intrinsic values as particular identities. Ishmael Reed calls it genesis. In *Writin' is Fightin'* (1988), Ishmael Reed writes:

Every nation has its version of Genesis (the tales of which weren't written until tenth century), but unlike the biblical Genesis, the myths, legends, and stories of many nations have yet to be written. This written or oral literature of a nation is often treated with reverence, because it forms the lore of a people. When the Icelandic Sagas were returned to Iceland from Denmark, a public holiday was declared. Similarly, the discovery of the Finnish Kalevala became an occasion of excitement and celebration. The hoodoo stories, the toasts, and the riddles and other neo-African literary forms constitute the basis for the Afro-American oral tradition, traces of which can be found wherever African people settled in this hemisphere.⁵

This quotation highlights the African American oral traditions. Oral literature, here, is associated with hoodoo which is improvised in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). Ishmael Reed associates oral literature with improvisation. In primitive cultures, people used to improvise because they could not publish. Whites rejected black literature because they did not want the Blacks to have an idea about their cultural background. The only way to express one's cultural form was to improvise. To that end Ishmael Reed asserts that:

Although Afro-American musical style like jazz and tap dance, rock and roll, and Black English – a literary style- are regularly used by the commercial world, from time-to-time campaigns are undertaken whose purpose is to purge the society of such forms. Right now, rap music, a descendant of the toast, and rock and roll are being excoriated from the pulpits of televangelists, which is not to say that all of the opponents of Afro-American culture are religious fanatics; indeed, some of the most strident condemnations of Afro-American culture-music, literature, and dance- have originated among the American intelligentsia.⁶

This quotation is evidence that Ishmael Reed's use of Neo-hoodooism is considered a new style. As a sake of argument, Papa Labas used to improvise hoodoo at Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral. This black religion, voodoo, called Jes Grew in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), is considered the black cultural heritage. Then, Papa Labas is Ishmael Reed's chosen character who uses improvisation to teach black people about their culture. This style based on oral tradition is Ishmael way of

⁵ Ishmael Reed, 1988, *Writin' is Fightin'*, Scribers, New York, p:135.

⁶ Ishmael Reed, *op. cit.*, 1988, pp:135 /136.



celebrating the African American culture. Obviously, it is clear that in a white racist community, only neo-hoodoo can help the black people express their culture owing to its improvisational form. Then, it is the most effective tool which successfully retraces the origin of African American culture. Many critics believe that voodoo's faith is a black religion taken from Africa. The slave trade is and remains the most valuable argument which attests that the African American music is derived from Africa. This is widely developed in the *New York Times*.⁷ In this journal, Ishmael Reed writes:

In an article printed in the New York Times music section entitled "African Pop", a critic wrote, "recognizable Yoruba (Nigerian-based) elements are prominent in salsa and in other music with Cuban roots, and the system of black American religious and magical beliefs known as voodoo or hoodoo is primarily Yoruba-derived."⁸

Ishmael Reed attests that Voodoo is an African derived faith. This argument is strengthened by Leonard Feldman. He is moved by indignation. He cannot admit hoodoo being associated with blasphemies. According to him voodoo is truly the mode of religion which the African Americans have inherited during colonization. It is celebrated through the dance. Ishmael Reed symbolizes it in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) by Jes Grew. This Jes Grew will be celebrated in ritual ceremonies by most African American. In addition to these arguments, Leonard Feldman brings more information about voodoo. *In a letter to the editor dated April 1982, Leonard Feldman responded to an editorial entitled "VooDoo Economics," a title in which voodoo was seen to be synonymous with the ridiculous*⁹. According to Leonard Feldman, "voodoo is an authentic religion."¹⁰ There is no way comparing it with "mockery". Otherwise, voodoo is considered a neo-African religion. It manifests itself in a body of mysteries expressed through an African American oral literature. To conclude, we can easily say that neo-hoodoo is the African American cultural version of Genesis. Africa is, then, the mother of many cultures. What are, then, the circumstances under which the black cultural heritage emerges in America?

⁷ (NYT): *The New York Times* is an American daily newspaper, founded and continuously published in New York City since September 18, 1851. It has won 112 Pulitzer Prizes, more than any other news organization. Its website is one of the America's most popular news sites, and the most popular among all the nation's newspapers, receiving more than 30 million unique visitors per month as reported in January 2011.

From: [https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/new-york-times#:~:text=The%20New%20York%20Times%20\(NYT\),than%20any%20other%20news%20organizati](https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/new-york-times#:~:text=The%20New%20York%20Times%20(NYT),than%20any%20other%20news%20organizati) on. Seen July 5th, 2024 at 23:45 pm.

⁸ Ishmael Reed, *Op.cit*, p: 136

⁹ Ishmael Reed, *Ibid*, p: 136

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p:136.

1.2. *The emergence of Jes Grew in America*

Jes Grew or the history of Neo-hoodooism is a kind of black faith taken from East Africa and brought to America through the institution of slavery. It is through this religion that Ishmael Reed draws his picture about his notion of interconnection. According to Ishmael Reed, the connection between Africa and America is done upon Neo-hoodooism.

Neo-hoodooism, as a wire, helps to connect Africa to America in terms of culture. The question is how does Neo-hoodooism interlink the two different cultural backgrounds in the same environment? Researches have shown that Neo-hoodooism was not born in America but in Africa and precisely in Egypt under the mysteries of Prince Osiris. Known under the name of Jes Grew, this black religion is a folded record of the book of Thoth. Brought in America by the slave trade, Jes Grew seeks to help black Americans to recapture with their cultural heritage. But its integration within modern America is not an easy task even though Whites' attempts to swipe it away is in vain. As an aesthetics from Ishmael Reed, Neo-hoodooism describes the black Americans' experiences from slavery till now. It is through this black derived faith that Ishmael Reed retraces the history of the black Americans. This simply means there is no society without background (origin). As western traditions are strictly tied to Ancient Greece, Neo-hoodoo, the African valuable religion, is to find its roots in Ancient Egypt. This is to say Reed's use of Neo-hoodooism is to retrace black Americans' origin. With neo-hoodoo Ishmael Reed clearly paves the way for Blacks living abroad precisely those living in America in particular.

Afro-Americans had been separated from their cultural background. Therefore, they felt lost and went for the search of their own identity. According to Ishmael Reed, Neo-hoodooism is the black faith of Africans living abroad. In this perspective, he retraces Neo-hoodoo back to Ancient Egypt. A religion brought in America during the middle passage. In *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Ishmael Reed writes:

Jes Grew carriers came to America because of cotton. Why cotton? American Indians often supplied all of their needs from one animal: the buffalo. Food, shelter, clothing, even fuel. Eskimos, the whale. Ancient Egyptians were able to nourish themselves from the olive tree and use it as a source of light; but Americans wanted to grow cotton. They could have raised soybeans, cattle, hogs or feed for these animals. There was no excuse. Cotton. Was it some unusual thrill at seeing the black hands come in contact with the white crop? 11

¹¹ Ishmael Reed, *op.cit*, 1972, p: 16.



The history of Jes Grew is an example Ishmael Reed uses to retell the history of the black Americans who were victim of slavery. Most of the Afro-Americans were brought in America during colonization. They served as breadwinners in the sugar plantation. Once in America, they felt lost. In this desire to be able to identify themselves, they came across Jes Grew. Jes Grew is the black derived faith which helps black Americans to recapture their cultural heritage. Such facts are Ishmael Reed's basics of his notion of genesis. Here, genesis stands for origin. But what is more critical is the circumstances under which Jes Grew survives in America. Ishmael Reed associates genesis with the circumstances under which Jes Grew emerges in America and its survival is analyzed through the difficulties the Blacks have met in their attempts to experiment it within the mainstream culture. That is to say the black derived culture suffers from racism. Blacks are forbidden to practice a religion of their own. They are forced to worship the white religion. This racist situation is illustrated by Ishmael Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) through the arrival of President Warren Harding to power. As a sake of argument, Ishmael Reed puts the following:

The Wallflower Order attempts to meet the psychic plague by installing an anti-Jes Grew President, Warren Harding. He wins on the platform "Let's be done with Wiggle and Wobble¹²," indicating that he will not tolerate this spreading infection. All sympathizers will be dealt with; carriers isolated and disinfected, Immuno-Therapy will begin once he takes office.¹³

This quotation is a close look at the living conditions of the Blacks living in America. Blacks have trouble to experiment their cultural heritage. Jes Grew's survival appears to be a difficult task. Whites are working against the spread of Jes Grew in order to stop it whereas the Blacks are struggling to let it survive. Since the Blacks felt lost, their only hope is Jes Grew. That is the only thing left for them. It is their source of consolation. This is why Jes Grew's manifestation is the dance. Dancing become an art form. That is to say it is one of the consequences of the institutions of slavery. Then the current American Art form like Jazz and blues to name but a few are products of what is known as Neo-hoodoo. Neo-hoodoo is the black identity that has been lost for years due to Whites' oppression and discrimination upon the Blacks'. It is this black identity they are looking for. Known as the "Book of Toth" in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Neo-hoodoo is the angle from which African Americans approach the world. According to Neo-hoodoo, the

¹² The Harding Era-Robert K. Murray. President Warren Harding was the 29th U.S president between 1921 and 1923 before dying of an apparent heart attack. Harding's presidency was overshadowed by the criminal activities of some of his cabinet members and other government officials, although he himself was not involved in any wrongdoing. From <https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/warren-g-harding> seen May 6th, 2023 at 14:56 pm.

¹³ Ishmael Reed, *op.cit.*, 1972, p: 17.

true history of the world has been distorted¹⁴. The true history of the world starts in Africa and its roots are to be found in Ancient Egypt. It all began in Ancient Egypt with Prince Osiris. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, it is known under Jes Grew. Jes Grew is the religion of Osiris. His religious activity is the dance and his brother Set, jealous about him, started helping the wallflower order. Prince Osiris' religion was a religion of peace because it was polytheistic. It is a multicultural religion. This attests once again Ishmael Reed's view of America as a multicultural country.

Since America is a country inhabited by people of different backgrounds, there is no question about promoting monoculturalism. In a community where people come from the different corners of the world, imposing one only culture would be so demanding. This is why Ishmael Reed's Neo-hoodooism was very important. Neo-hoodooism posits that everybody should practice the religion of his own. People should have the freedom to practice the religion they want. Cultural and religious beliefs should be performed independently.

Ancient Egypt believed in a religion based on Osiris mysteries. Osiris religion was a peaceful religion. it helps Egyptians to make fortune. There are gods to be fed or venerated. If you take care of those gods, they will protect you from evil. These gods are seen as protecting gods. They bring fortune to the community and

¹⁴In *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Ishmael Reed explains this distortion of the black history through his characters, the Mu'tafikah. According to him, white people have stolen many things from black people, then black artifacts should be returned back. One of the Mu'tafikah mission is to "return the plundered art to Africa, South America and China, the ritual accessories which had been stolen so that we could see the gods return and the spirit aroused". (Ishmael Reed, 1972, *Mumbo Jumbo*, pp: 87/88). Returning black artifacts to their place of origin is a way of reinterpreting the true history of the world. According to Ishmael Reed, the true history of the world has been falsified. The role of the Blacks in history has been next to nothing. Black people have been portrayed as people who can achieve nothing. It has been said Africa has no history. It was painted as a land with no civilization. Among the Whites who maintains the thesis about which Africa is a barbarous land with no history figures Hegel. According to Hegel, the idea of an African philosophy does not exist. Because for Hegel if a community cannot write then, it has no culture. Under such circumstances, Ishmael Reed proposes a reinterpretation of History. This justifies probably his Afrocentrism.

According to Ishmael Reed, the true history of the world is centered on Africa. His Afrocentrism can be associated with his Egypt-centrism. Neo-hoodooism is an ancient Egyptian religion brought in America through the slave trade. This black faith which finds its root in Egypt is the black cultural heritage which is in conflict with the white Christian religion. Moreover, it is believed that Christianity is derived from neo-hoodooism since it is a distorted version from Osirian mysteries, Neo-hoodooism. According to Ishmael Reed, the left-hand version from Jes grew is Moses' teachings in *Mumbo Jumbo*. If Moses teaching is the bible and the bible is distortions of version from Neo-hoodooism then black civilization is the mother of the white civilization. Even Greek mythology is busy admiring Egyptian mysteries. As a sake of argument, Ishmael Reed asserts: "The Greek and Roman masses were crazy about Egyptian mysteries and celebrated them in the temples of Osiris and Isis." (Ishmael Reed, 1972, *Mumbo Jumbo*, p 170). African mysteries are brought in Greek by Dionysus.



then peace overtakes the realms which are under their control. This was how things were going in Ancient Egypt. But soon problems occur. There is a battle between Osiris and Set's companions. These people who help Osiris are called Jes Grew carriers and Set's gang is called Atonist or wallflower orders. Set and his gang want to stop Osiris' teaching but once the text, *Jes Grew*, has been lost everybody went after it. They are all looking for the text because it is their cultural background. In one word, we can say that Ishmael Reed's notion of genesis is associated with the history of black Americans which, he extends back to ancient Egypt and his view of survival must be tied to the circumstances under which the black cultural heritage emerges in America. However, this black culture meets with a problem of integration in America. Blacks could not experience their culture because of racism. Their religion and culture were falsified to keep them in ignorance. Aware of this, Ishmael Reed engages himself in reinterpreting the true but historical background of the Blacks.

2. Reed's Reinterpretation of the true history of the Blacks

The notion of reinterpretation is one of Ishmael Reed's most successful devices to describe the history of African Americans. It is the philosophy he uses to reclaim history. In *Before Columbus Foundation* (1992) as in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Ishmael Reed has elaborated long chapters for the reinterpretation of such a history.

2.1. *The challenge to the mainstream culture*

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, he deconstructs the former institutions or the Whites racist systems such as racial segregation and discrimination to tell the true history of the world. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a countercultural and a reinterpretation of history, art, and religion whereas in *Before Columbus Foundation* (1992), the western literature called the mainstream or the dominant literary production is exposed to be lie. These critics posit that the true history of the world has been distorted. In this perspective, Maurice Kenny asserts that: "*I have attempted in my poems and stories to clean the lies of history and the historian. I have attempted to bring my piece of kindling to the village fire*".¹⁵

Here, Maurice Kenny clearly shows that his efforts are directed toward correcting the mainstream literature. Many thinkers believe that American history is so limited. It needs to be revised. Whites' historians do not give a fair description of the American history. In their attempts to define the American history, many other cultures are excluded. This is why, Ishmael Reed and his mates believe that the involvement of the other cultures is compulsory. Then as Maurice Kenny,

¹⁵ Ishmael Reed, 1992, *Before Columbus Foundation*, Scribner's, New York, p: XVII.



Ishmael Reed is very much preoccupied by the redefinition of the mainstream culture. It is their only way of reinterpreting the true history of the world. They are joined by Milton Murayama who “*was adamant about the writer’s role in recording untold stories and the power of fiction to engage the reader’s sensory imagination: A writer is a historian. He can tell it in flesh and blood the way it was.*”¹⁶ Telling the history of the world needs to be more objective. Therefore, objectivity is an integral part of the revision of the white literature. Apart from these critics, come the women. Women play an important role in the issue of the reinterpretation of the American history. In this perspective, Ishmael Reed explains:

The revision of history through literature is an ongoing claim to presence and power. Josephine Hendin explained the impetus for her novel: I wanted to described the relationship between an Italian-American father and daughter in a way that had not been done. so often the stories of immigrant life have been limited to the story of fathers and son.¹⁷

This quotation is strengthened by Susan Howe who “*sees her specialty as North American History-specifically that of New England and hopes in her story to show that we have been told the wrong story*”.¹⁸ All these critics are dedicated to redefine the history of American through literature. Like these women Ishmael Reed’s work dismantles the white civilization and exposes it as a lie. According to Ishmael Reed, the American culture is a mixture of many different cultures. Indeed, American culture is influenced by African culture and European culture in particular. This is illustrated by Ishmael Reed in *Writin’ is Fightin’* (1988). In this essay, Ishmael Reed clearly admits:

Even the notion of North America is part of the western civilization because our system of government derived from Europe is being challenged by Native American historians who say that the founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin especially, were actually influenced by the system of government that had been adopted by Iroquois hundreds of years prior to the arrival of large numbers of Europeans.¹⁹

This quotation illustrates that the notion of pure American culture is deniable. America was built by many cultures. It is a mixture of the European culture with the African one. For instance, American literature was influenced by many thinkers such as John Lock, Jean Jacque Rousso, Thomas Hobbes, William

¹⁶ Ishmael Reed, *op.cit*, p: XVII.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p; XVII.

¹⁸ Ishmael Reed, *op.cit*, p: XVII.

¹⁹ Reed, Ishmael, *op.cit*, 1988, pp: 53/54.



Wordsworth to name but a few. These writers have impact in America in terms of thinking. The birth of Romanticism is a perfect illustration. It is a literary movement which is well developed by the white Americans but it was not born in America. Romanticism was born in Europe under the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge in 1798. Then, there is evidence that the American literature is very much influenced by many cultures from different backgrounds. Therefore, the idea of pure American civilization is a fruit of a lot of controversies. Many arguments attested that the western civilization is a mixture of a lot of cultures. With the slave trade, African culture has contributed a lot to the western culture and particularly to the American culture. In *Writin' is Fightin'* (1988), Ishmael Reed continues: "*western civilization, then, becomes another confusing category like third world, or Judeo-Christian culture, as man attempts to impose his small-screen view of political and cultural reality upon a complex world.*"²⁰ This illustration justifies successfully that there is no true description of the American culture without mentioning the ineluctable contribution of the other cultures. American culture includes all the other cultural forms coming from different backgrounds. Otherwise, the world culture which resides in America is part of the American culture. In a country where many cultures crisscross, Ishmael Reed believes there is no pure culture. This is probably the reasons why Ishmael Reed declares:

It has already begun because the world is here. The world has been arriving at these shores for at least ten thousand years from Europe, Africa, and Asia. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, large numbers of Europeans arrived, adding their cultures to those of the European, African, and Asian settlers who were already here, and recently millions have been entering the country from south America and Caribbean, making Yale Professor Bob Thompson's bouillabaisse richer and thicker.²¹

All these cultures contributed a lot to the building process of the American country. America is a country made by many brains culturally, economically and politically. America becomes the center of the world where all cultures find their repository. Thus, America is like a melting pot²². This is why Ishmael Reed calls America "*a place where the cultures of the world crisscross. This is possible because the United States is unique in the world: the world is here.*"²³ This quotation illustrates once again that American culture is the mixture of many cultures coming from different backgrounds. This is why America is called a nation of nations. Its

²⁰ *Ibid* 1988, p: 54.

²¹ Ishmael Reed, *op. cit.*, 1988, p: 56.

²² melting pot is a place or situation where the people and cultures of many different places mix together. From <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/melting-pot> seen October 6, 2022 at 15:20 pm

²³ *Ibid*, 1988, p: 56.



culture is composed of the cultural forms of many societies from different backgrounds. All these aspects combined can explain how the mainstream lacks to describe the true history of the world. The challenge to the bad image of Africa is also developed in Ishmael Reed's masterpiece, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). In this book, the central thesis of the plot is the book of Toth which is the text that sums up Jes grew movement. It is in this work that Ishmael successfully reclaims history. This text has been lost by Jes Grew Carriers. They all are looking for the text. Moses who, first gets the lost text, tries to translate. Consequently, he gets the left-hand version which is considered a distorted version of the religion of Prince Osiris in ancient Egypt.

2.2. *Jes Grew: a distorted story*

Some aspects of the novel, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), extremely show that Jes Grew has been falsified by the Whites. This is cleverly represented by the battle between Jes Grew carriers and the American white community. Whites develop strategies to stop Jes Grew that is seeking to survive. *Mumbo Jumbo* begins with the shock between monoculturalism and multiculturalism. Every culture fights to maintain its hegemony: Whites fight to stop black culture from being propagated and Blacks fight for the survival of Jes Grew. Ishmael Reed exemplifies this battle for black cultural survival by the conflict between Papa LaBas and the Wallflower Order. Jes Grew embodies multiculturalism, liberty and inclusion. The wallflower order is monocultural. Therefore, it is working against Jes Grew from being spread.

Another element which attests the falsification of Jes Grew or the black culture is the Atonist attempt to translate Jes Grew. In the book, Moses tries to translate the book of Toth and he gets the left-hand version; and according to many critics, this left-hand version held by Moses is the Bible used by the Christians. As a matter of consequences, Christianity was born with the advent of this religion set by Toth which is a written record of the Osirian mysteries. Based on dancing, the religion activities of Prince Osiris are similar to the Christian religion. Music transcends the boundaries of ethnicity, race and religious beliefs. By crossing the boundaries of nations, music reduces distance and differences. Music is a cultural introduction. Singing music is telling one's culture. One's musical form is one's cultural expression. Through music you can easily discover the life and the social belongings of a community. This is spiritual music. Through music, Ishmael Reed values diversity. As a connecting tool, music gathers people from different backgrounds. In this angle, it helps to connect people by removing their cultural boundaries.

In Christian religion, dancing is among their pillars because it helps them to be in communion with their culture. In their cathedral, they used to sing and dance.



On Sundays, churches are crowded and Christians sing and dance. This is according to Ishmael Reed the origin of the Christian religion which is the Bible. This Bible is part of the book of Thoth. This book of Thoth has been the central thesis of the book. This is to say Moses' religion has been stolen from Osirian mysteries. This is why he goes to Osiris' Temple where Isis is now the holder. From there, Moses wants to know where the book is hidden. And Set, Isis' brother, feels jealous about Osiris. Consequently, he joins Moses to fight against Osiris.

Moses sings and dances to contrast Osiris because his teachings could be seen as distortions to Osirian mysteries. These teachings of Moses rings as an indictment to Osirian teachings. These kind of enemies of Human spirit are termed by Ishmael Reed as "Atonists". Atonists forces are working against the Osirian mysteries. All these efforts are turned to give a distorted version of Osiris mysteries. Moses' efforts are reducible to the white racist system which is working against the survival of Jes Grew. They do not want to let Blacks get the Osirian mysteries because Osiris religion is the Jes Grew Philosophy which once in America will be spread in the hands of many. And once in the hands of black Americans, they will no longer be kept in ignorance. They will be able to easily hear the true history of black people which has been falsified by the Whites. They will fully be aware of their own values. Their culture will be accessible to them more than ever. This is why Ishmael Reed views Christianity²⁴ as an unfair religion. According to Ishmael Reed, Christianity is the first item that segregates the black community.

Christianity is the distortion of Osiris teachings. According to Ishmael Reed, Christianity is the teaching of Moses and Moses teachings are the left-hand version of Osirian book of Thoth which by the way has known many alterations. Moses' teachings are fierce attacks on Osiris teachings. Then according to these information, Ishmael Reed believes that Christianity is the only responsible for black Americans' misfortune because he just believes that Christianity is the only responsible religious practice that prevents black people from their true heritage. The true history of the world has been distorted by the teachings of Moses. African religion, Jes Grew, is depicted as evil. Christianity goes as far as calling Africa the darker continent. The true history of black people has been distorted and Ishmael Reed believes that Moses is the only responsible. According to these elements, the history of religion starts in Egypt in Africa. Egypt is the background of both black and western religion because Jes Grew "*becomes a worldwide symbol*

²⁴ Christianity is one of the white institutions which portrays the black religion as blasphemies. According to Christianity, black religions are aberrations from the divine nature. Christianity believes that practicing the Osiris ritualistic mysteries is just blaspheming against the true God. Thus, Osirian mysteries are of animistic realities. This is why Christianity has nothing to do with Osirian mysteries.



for religious and aesthetic freedom. When an artist happens upon a new form he shouts "I have reached my Haiti"²⁵ According to this history of religion, Africa is the background of the world.

CONCLUSION

In short, we can state that the notions of genesis and survival can be associated with the experience of the Blacks before and after slavery. It is a broad account for the Blacks' experience throughout the world and quite special in the United States of America. It retraces the history of the Blacks' origin back to Africa and how they manage to make their culture survive in a white racist society like the one of United States of America. According to Ishmael Reed, the history of the world started in Ancient Egypt. Based on Afrocentric philosophy, Jes Grew seeks to dismantle the white civilization. Thus, the conflict between Jes Grew carriers and the wallflower order is similar to the battle between the white culture and the black culture. The white culture seeks to maintain its domination whereas the black culture fights for its liberation. This same battle started in Ancient Egypt. Otherwise, the same battle between the white culture and the black one can be associated with the battle between the Egyptian gods, Osiris and Aton.

In *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Jes Grew is the Osirian mysteries, and the wallflower order is the Atonist gang who seeks to stop Osiris. They stand for the Atonists' god. Atonists are racist monotheist believers. They are cruel to Jes Grew, the black religion. That is why they set barriers against Jes Grew. In this sphere, Moses' gang is seen as the founder of the Israelite faith which extends to the west. Moses' stay or journey in Egypt was in search for knowledge. Once in Egypt, Moses was initiated to the teaching of Osiris. After being well initiated, Moses had translated the text, Jes Grew. This is where everything begins. Ishmael Reed calls it genesis, the origin of the black cultural heritage which survives to this day. First, Moses' translation of the text is associated with the White's distortion of the Blacks' history.

Second, Moses' journey to Egypt can be seen as his quest for knowledge. Ancient Egypt is considered the center of the world in terms of knowledge. Every chap who went there was considered a researcher. And once you are well experienced, you can go back and teach your community what you have learnt from Ancient Egypt. According to these arguments, Egypt is the background of the world in terms of knowledge. All the civilizations find their source in Ancient Egypt. The history of Osiris and Aton, the two black gods, have helped Ishmael Reed to retrace the origin of the Blacks. This is why *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) can be read as a history of religion. This history of religion is the true history of the world. It finds

²⁵ Ishmael Reed, 1972, *Mumbo Jumbo*, Scribner's, New, York, p: 64



its roots in Egypt. Ancient Egyptian's god Prince Osiris has created a religion known under the name of Neo-hoodooism. Its text *Jes Grew* is folded in the Book of Thoth. It is a democratic religion because it is multicultural. With *Jes Grew*, you can worship many different gods. Set, Osiris brother, is the first obstacle for Osiris. He sides with the Atonists to defeat his brother Osiris. The Atonists' gang is incarnated by the wallflower order.

And then, the battle between Osiris and Aton is exemplified by the conflict between monoculturalism and multiculturalism. *Jes Grew* is multicultural because it is a polytheist religion whereas the Atonists are monocultural because they believe in monotheism. Polytheism and monotheism are the two concepts Ishmael Reed uses to tell the history of Ancient Egypt. In this climate of confrontation, Moses sides with Set. His ability to translate the sacred text gives him more fame than ever. Supported by Set, Moses' teachings appear to be more challenging to the teachings of Osiris. By translating the text, Moses gets the left-hand version. This left-hand version is, according to Ishmael Reed, the Bible. Or the white religion. As a matter of consequence, Egypt is the background of the world in terms of culture. Otherwise, if Christianity is the white civilization, if Christianity is the left-hand version of the Osirian mysteries, therefore, the white civilization is the falsification of the black culture. Consequently, the white civilization finds its roots in Africa. This is what Ishmael Reed's notions of genesis and survival are all about. In much of his work, he retraces the influence of the black culture through the black derived faith, Neo-hoodooism. This religion of Prince Osiris brought in America by the slave trade aims at reconnecting the black Americans with their cultural heritage. As a black spiritual and cultural form, it attests with a solid background that Africa has a smart history. It is a response to those who deny Africa its role in history. *Jes Grew* is, then, Ishmael Reed's justification of the existence of an African history. In this perspective, *Jes Grew* exposes the White's prejudices to be a lie. Briefly, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), can be read as the western civilization's attempt to stop the African culture through the history of the Judeo-Christian faith during a specific period called the Egyptian Exile. The history of this Egyptian Exile is Ishmael Reed's opportunity to magnify the Egyptian discoveries in terms of anthropologies.

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