

**Tribhuvan University**

**Conflict between Afro-American Shamanic Practice and Christian Salvation  
in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone***

**A Thesis Submitted to the Central Department of English  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of  
Masters of Arts in English**

**By**

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The Thesis entitled, “Conflict between Afro-American Shamanic Practice and Christian Salvation in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*,” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Kulanand Khadka has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

**Members of the Research Committee**

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**Approval Letter**

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### **Abstract**

August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* highlights the conflict between African Shamanic cultural practice and the Christian religious practice. The major characters, Bynum and Loomis endeavor to unite the people and heal them through their special power that they claim to have possessed culturally. On the other hand, Loomis's wife, Martha believes in Christian rituals for African-American people's salvation. So, their effort to bind and heal sick, lost, and separated people physically as well as spiritually through herbs, black songs and rituals, and Christian rituals exposes conflict though Bynum's practice are significant to resolve the conflict.

## **Contents**

Acknowledgements

Abstract

|  |       |
|--|-------|
| Chapter I. August Wilson and His Context                             | 1-9   |
| Chapter II. Afro-American Culture, Shamanism and Christianity        | 10-33 |
| Chapter III. Conflict between Afro-American Culture and Christianity | 34-52 |
| Chapter IV. Conclusion   | 52-54 |

Works Cited

**Tribhuvan University**  
**Central Department of English**  
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**Letter of Recommendation**

Mr. Kulanand Khadka has completed his thesis entitled “Conflict between Afro-American Shamanic Practice and Christian Salvation in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*” under my supervision. He carried out his research from 2065/05/01 B.S. to 2066/03/07 B.S. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for viva voice.

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## I. Introduction

This research work is a study of August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* which highlights the effect of shamanism and Christianity in the lives of African-American people in America. It attempts to explore the relationship and conflict between the belief in Shamanic and Christian salvation. Shamanism is part of African-American people's traditional cultural practice which comes into conflict with Christianity as people from different religious beliefs live in America. Christianity is generally known as the religion of the whites though many people are adopting Christianity these days. The main character, the wife, Martha tells her husband to pray to the God, Jesus for his salvation which reflects the faith in Christian Salvation but the husband, Herald Loomis denies Christianity and rubs the blood over his face by slashing himself on his chest with his knife, which is the result of his belief in African cultural Shamanic practice. This reflects his faith in traditional culture for his Salvation. Besides, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* includes a story of a Shiny Man, rituals, ghosts, a juba, and a self-inflicted cutting, all of which relate to the tenets of African traditional religion, whereas characters of the Shiny Man and Martha represent Christianity. This creates a sort of conflict in the play.

August Wilson was born in Pittsburg on 27, April House. His name at birth was Frederick August Kittle. He was a son of a German-American father and an African-American mother. His parents were separated and his father never lived with his family. So his mother was forced to support her large family

by working as a member of cleaning work. Wilson had a very unhappy childhood as he could not get equal from his parents. He was called Freddy as he was child but after his father's death he chose to be called August Wilson to honor his mother and took the last name from his mother, Daisy Wilson. The fourth of the six children's Wilson grew up in a two room apartment behind a grocery store. His white father was a distant figure whom Wilson never saw. During Wilson's teen age year in the late 1950s, his mother married to David Bedford, an African-American man. Bedford moved the family to a mostly white suburb where they experienced extreme racial intimidation. Although Daisy encouraged the playwright and his five Siblings to pursue an education, the racist treatment he received in the formal school system encouraged Wilson to drop out in the teen age. Instead, Wilson educated himself in his local library, focusing mainly on black writer. He was married three times. His first marriage to Brenda Burton in 1994 and he had two daughters: Sakina Ansari and Azula Carmen. On August 26, 2005, he told his hometown newspaper, "The Pittsburgh Post Gazette" that had been diagnosed with liver cancer in June, 2005 and had been given three to five months to live. He died on October 2, 2005 at Swedish medical centre in Seattle.

On 1 April 1965, Wilson bought his first typewriter, having determined that he would become a writer. In the fall of that year, he moved into a rooming house and began a long and varied assortment of menial jobs to support his writing. He had a profound effect upon his determination to capture black culture and historical experience in his writing. He was author of Cycle of plays, is set in a different of twentieth centuries about black American life. He was accused of plagiarizing a paper he had written about Napoleon so he dropped out the school

at the age of 15. He was largely self-educated. In the 1960s and 1970s he became involved in the Civil Right Movement and began to tell himself as a black nationalist. He joined the Black Aesthetic Movement in the late 1960s and became the confounder and director of Black Horizons Theatre in Pittsburgh.

Gaining confidence as a playwright from close associations with important contacts such as directors Puredy and Richards, Wilson committed himself for writing a series of plays addressing central issues that have impacted African-Americans in each decade of the twentieth century. He was able to focus his playwriting skills on what he felt were the most important issues confronting African-Americans each decade and then committed himself for writing ten plays emphasizing these issues.

The play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), centers on a lively Jazz singer and her group who decide whether to pursue their art or cave into commercial considerations. The play establishes Wilson's theme of the African-American response to the demands of assimilation which erodes black identity and corrupts individual artist.

In *Fences* (1987), the subject is about a garbage collector whose dreams of playing professional baseball are shattered by white racism. The protagonist Maxton's bitterness leads him to deny his son – the athletic success that was not possible for the blacks in the past. *The Piano Lesson* (1990) deals with a black family conflict over an heirloom piano. It explores the connection between blacks and their past. Bernice's brother Boy Willie wants to sell the piano to buy farmland and the issue threatens to tear the family apart.

Another play *Two Trains Running* (1992) treats African American experience during different eras. Wilson probed the turbulent era of the late

1960s, when racial strife and the Vietnam War convulsed the nation. Similarly, *Seven Guitars* (1995) takes place during the post World War II. The king Hedley, a cracked old man sees ghost and becomes obsessed with fathering a child. By focusing on blues and music, Wilson continues his chronicle of African-American life.

August Wilson is one of America's most prolific writers, whose plays, like those written by Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams are produced throughout the country on a regular basis. He has won two Pulitzer Prizes for *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. He has also won New York Drama Circle Award and Tony Award Nomination for the best play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in 1985. Similarly, he has own Drama Desk Award for outstanding new plays, New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the best play and Tony Award Nomination for the best play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* in 1988. Also, he has won American Theater Critics Association Award, New York Drama Critics Circle Citation for the best play, Tony Award Nomination for the best play *Two Trains Running* in 1992, The New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the best play, Tony Award Nomination for the best play *Seven Guitars* in 1996.

Wilson's plays clearly demonstrate the tensions between blacks who want to hold on to their African heritage and those who want to break away from it. As a result of being pulled into different direction, violence often breaks out among blacks in Wilson's plays. Yet that violence is often misdirected. Writing the plays which were set in the twentieth century is to rewrite the history to tell the truths about the forgotten, misrepresented, and silenced black masses. He concentrates on bringing the past into present as a healing measure for all

Americans today. His cycles of plays are intended to illuminate the shadowy past of Afro-American by focusing on black issues.

His mission of writing plays is to express the racial discrimination and exploitation which is based on discrimination of color and race where the principle of racial discrimination is the denial of equality due to color and personal characteristics. So, his play tells us about pain, suffering, frustration, anger and anxiety in the white dominated society. Black African's struggle is to escape from their psychological or spiritual confinement in white dominated society. His plays evoke both the condition that they struggle against and in moments of intensely theatrical action that embraces the mythic and ritualistic and which are always associated with the power of music and songs – the force by which cultural emancipation and empowerment may be achieved. So, this suggestion is to break the hierarchy existing between the white and the blacks in America and rediscover to achieve their full emancipation from racial subordination.

Most of his plays suggest that black people should recreate their identity in a white-dominated society. Wilson has felt that black people must know their root to understand themselves and his plays demonstrate the black struggle to gain his understanding. Charles Whittaker, a critic for *ebony* wrote: "Each of the eight plays, he has produced to date is a set of different decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century, a device that has enabled Wilson to explore, often in very subtle ways, the myriad and mutating forms of the legacy of slavery" (67).

His *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1984), on which this research is based focuses on the search of the identity which is possible only when the blacks create their own traditional cultural stand point and without following white

culture. Although, Herald Loomis, the protagonist believes he is searching for his wife but the African Conjurer, Bynum lets him know that he is really searching for his song or ideality. Herald Loomis has forgo ten his song as a result of seven year enslavement by Joe Turner a notorious Tennessee plantation owner that illegally enslaved free African-American to work for him. Bynum tells him that Turner captured him not just to work on his plantation but to try to steal Herald's song. Bynum says, "Now he's got you bound up to where you can't sing your own song. Couldn't sing it theme seven years because you was afraid, he would snatch it from under you" (23).

By analyzing the meaning and plot of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Frank Rich says in The New York Times:

*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is set in a turn of the century black boarding house in Pittsburgh, is about one of a series that explores African American life decade by decade. In it, Herald Loomis turns up, claiming he has escaped from forced labor, only to find that his wife is now a religious fanatic. The plot is less important than Wilson's provocative effort to render the feel of African American life and the conflict. (165)

The play has been analyzed from various perspectives since it's publication in 1986. It is also important to analyze the shamanic tradition. The main characters are lost, displaced and isolated. They have come to the North from the South in search of a safe and secure place. They are mostly freed slaves who go through sever pangs of sufferings physically, spiritually and psychologically as they find themselves in the new surroundings. So, one of the major characters, Bynum endeavors to unite and heal them through his special

power that he claims to have possessed culturally. Bynum's effort to bind and heal the sick, lost and separated people physically, spiritually as well as psychologically through herbs, black song, music, magic and other rituals which is the traditional cultural belief of African American people that is termed as shamanic tradition. On this regard, by analyzing African American traditional practice in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Pereira says:

Bynum is a 'conjure' whose craft is devoted to the reunion of lost and separated persons whom he 'binds' psychologically and spiritually. Having attained spiritual illumination, he is capable of facilitating the same in others. Yet, the racial ideology of the play suggests that, in spite of his knowledge of the African folk and spiritual customs, he is nevertheless torn between two worlds. Bynum doesn't bind people exclusively, he also unifies cultures. His visionary sequences reveal the conjunction of African and Christian motifs. (71)

Due to the domination of white modern culture over traditional Afro-American culture, the self identity and belief of cultural rituals are lost. It creates diversity in black's unity. This situation does not help to be free from domination. So, to create their own new identity through their own culture, they can be free from racial discrimination. In this regard, Wilson says:

They arrive caring Bibles and guitars, their pockets linked with dust and fresh hope, marked men and women seeking to scrape from the narrow crooked cobbles and the fiery blasts of the coke furnace a way of bludgeoning and shaping the malleable parts

themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth. (2)

So, his plays evoke both the condition that their struggle against and in moments of intensely theoretical action that embrace the mythic and ritualistic and which are always associated with the power of music and song – the forces by which cultural emancipation and empowerment can be achieved. Thus, his drama suggests, black American must rediscover to achieve their full emancipation from racial subordination. Anyway his drama tells us about pain, frustration, anger, anxiety in a white dominated society. By doing so, Wilson wants to change the society; he wants to break the hierarchy existing between the whites and the blacks in America. His plays deal with common people and are created with elements of mysticism, spiritualism and storytelling. All of these elements, which are often found in African culture, are prominent in Wilson's plays.

The symbolic meaning of the protagonist – Herald's search for his lost wife is the search for the traditional cultural existence where he can be free from the white's domination. When Herald visits his lost wife, he rejects to accept her as his wife because his wife is following Christianity which is the religion of white due to which he was enslaved. In this way, many critics have reviewed the play from various perspectives. Some critics discuss Wilson's portrayal of women in the play. Although Wilson himself had said many times that he does not focus on women in his works. But more over, the present researcher will observe the conflict between shamanism and Christian salvation from the Afro-American cultural point of view.

The thesis has been divided into four chapters. The first chapter presents an introductory outline of the work – a short introduction to August Wilson and a short critical response. Moreover, it gives a bird's eye view of this entire work.

The second chapter tries to explain the theoretical modality briefly that is applied in this research work. It discusses black culture, cultural identity and Christianity and Shamanism

On the basis of the theoretical framework established in the second chapter, the third chapter analyzes the text at a considerable length. It analyzes how the blacks' past has played significant role in the lives of blacks in modern times in America. As a result people are confused as to how to embrace Shamanism and Christianity. It sorts out some extracts from the text as evidence to prove the hypothesis of the study.

Finally, the fourth or the last chapter will sum up the main points of the present research work and the findings of the research work.

## **II. Afro-American Culture and Christianity**

An African-American is a member of an ethnic group in the United States whose ancestors, usually in predominant part, were indigenous to Africa, many African-Americans possess European, Native American, and, to a lesser degree, Asian ancestry as well. So, the “term” African-American refers specifically to black African ancestry, not, for example, to European colonial or Arab African ancestry, such as Arab Moroccan or white south African-European ancestry. African-American means an American of African descent.

The American south originally belonged to Afro-American, who gave a new shape to the landscape by building houses, clearing the forest and planting and harvesting crops. It was shaped by their labour so they still have the spiritual relationship with the south. But it is surprising to state that they were the tenants in their own land. They were aliens in their own land. Their labour was valued but they were dehumanized. It was neither economically nor legally their own land. The white claimed for the land cultivated by supposed culturally inferior people. Now-a-days, black America considers the south as their own root and motherland. The southern landscape evokes their ancestors, their family history and their cultural practice.

The history of Afro-Americans dates long way back in the early seventeenth century. It started in the United States in 1629 when the first slaves were brought from Africa to the North America. Majority of the African-Americans were brought to the North America as slaves between 1619 and 1807. As European established settlers moved to America, they soon began to import

qualities of captives taken from relatively circumscribed portion of the west of Africa to do the work they were reluctant to do themselves. Within the course of a couple of centuries, the whole western Hemisphere including European became populated with representatives of these distinctive human populations. They were placed face to face with the whites but at very different levels on the socio-economic scale. The diffidence in the force was then assumed to be inherent in visible physical difference.

America is the dwelling place of different ethnic as well as racial groups. English, French, German, Italian are some of the ethnic group of white people. Similarly, there are many black ethnic groups who came from different African nations Congo, Gambia, Ghana, Senegal and Nigeria. Like the whites, the blacks were also rightful heirs to America's legacy. It is important to note that the first attempt to settle down in this country was located in the area that would later to be known as the south. The south was made a good home by the blacks with their blood, sweat, and tears but it is a pity that traditional history disavows that slaves and descendents of slaves have contributed to develop American culture.

While most Africans lived within a semi-centralized state or country, others lived in small village with no state protection. Without such protection, the Africans were at higher risk to be enslaved. The different black ethnic groups were usually sold to European traders by powerful interior states in exchange for European goods. Since early Europeans had little success against the African states militarily, the non-urbanized Africans become frequent victims. Stateless area such as Gambia, Guinea fell into the hands of Europeans who sold the inhabitants as needed to colonies in the new world.

Afro-American culture which emerged from slavery evolved through creolization as it came into close contact with Euro-American culture. There occurred an interaction between African tradition and Euro-American tradition where Afro- American tried to maintain and build up their culture through music, song, folklore myth and magic. So, the mixture of the elements of African tradition with the European-American is known as Afro-American culture. For the blacks in the United States, the cultural creolization has involved two complex and dynamic aspects. First, among African themselves, a creolization process developed as an African captured from different places. It was a process of mutual cultural experience and exchange where synthesis took place. Secondly, almost simultaneously, this type of dynamic mixture of African culture was which were themselves varied because of the different national identities and cultural patterns of the oppressive slave traders and plantation owners.

African Americans have contributed literature, art, agricultural skills, foods, clothing styles, music, language and technological innovation to American culture. The traditional types of cultivation and use of many agricultural products such as yams, peanuts, rice, okra, sorghum, grits, watermelon and cotton can be traced to Africa for their cultural importance. They have their own cultural beliefs that the agricultural productions can be used for their rituals to cure and heal the person who are psychologically as well as physically ill. So, they believe and follow their own traditional culture not only as a continuation of their tradition but they follow it for their salvation and satisfaction. By analyzing the cultural influence in United States, Carter G. Woodson says:

African-American music is one of the most pervasive African-American culture influences in the United States today and is among the most dominant in mainstream popular music. Hip hop, R and B, funk, rock and roll, soul, blues and other contemporary American musical forms originated in black communities and evolved from other black form of music, including blues, rag-time, jazz, and gospel music. African-American derived musical forms have also influenced and been incorporated virtually every other popular musical genre in the world. African-American genres are the most important ethnic vernacular tradition in America, as they have developed independent of African traditions from which they arise more so than any other immigrant groups, including Europeans; make up the broadest and longest lasting range of style in America; and have historically, been more influential, intercultural and economically, than other American vernacular traditions. (54)

Both during and after slavery times, African-Americans have made significant contributions to American culture. Their influence has been particularly noticeable in popular music and dance – some American musical genres, popular music and dance-some American musical genres, such as blues, jazz and hip-hop are essentially African-American and the dance forms associated with them are of largely African-American origin. Due to the enslavement, they are suffering psychologically and physically. Because of the pain, tension, frustration, they are lost and separated psychologically and physically. In order to remove such pain, tension and frustration, they perform

their cultural practice because they gave belief and faith on their own traditional culture. When they involve in the dance programmer they feel free from the mental tension and they have the feeling of their oneness which makes them strong to go against the slavery. Their own traditional culture has been best medium to strongly assert their existence.

Slave spirituals were among the earliest form of artistic self-expression available to African-Americans. The songs were based on Christian hymn and tradition, but often departed radically from the complacent austerity to white hymns. This spiritual tradition provided the birthing ground for what Levine calls “the most highly personalized genre of African-American music: the blues” (221). The blues had emerged as a dynamic and powerful addition to the music of black America. In this regard, Schultz remarks, “In the spirituals, black Americans first started to sing of their feeling of homelessness; in the blues, they continued to sing it” (127). The Afro-American families were searching for their dwellings with the help of singing the music; they create a network among many families which helps them to be united. In this regard, Herbert Gautam states:

The recovery of records of viable Afro-American families and kin networks during and after slavery makes it possible to begin a long overdue examination of how there developed among black Americans a culture shaped by the special ways in which they adapted first to the harshness of initial enslavements [. . .] there must be link between generation of different families. Without them, it is difficult for a culture to be transmitted over time and member of developing social classes can not adapt for changing external circumstances. That is so far slaves and non-slaves. (7-8)

Because of the long practice, African influences survived in the music, dance and other aspects of slave life for a long period in Louisiana. Voodoo and conjuring, which were facets of slave life prominent in Louisiana and low country, had wide spread significance. These beliefs were crucial elements of social control in areas where Christianity might not have been fully accepted and even, perhaps, where it had been. They served to create a sense of unity, to instill values and to minimize community disputes. For example, on aspect of differential slave morality was the definition of theft. Defined as one slave taking away something from another, theft did not refer for stealing from the master. After theft occurred, often slaves depended upon the remedies of conjurers. Such remedies of course had no basis in either established law or science but derived their effects from an accepted folk wisdom and folk songs. This African-American tradition, as their ancestors did; help to make a bridge between the black community's folk roots and the black American tradition. Blaissingame outlines the value of the folk tales which emerged out of slave environment:

The folk tales also represented the distillation of folk wisdom and were used as an instructional device to teach young slaves to survive. A projection of the slave's personal experience, dreams, and hopes the folk tales allowed him to express hostility to his master, to poke fun at himself, and to delineate the working of the system. At the same time, by viewing himself as an object, verbalizing his dreams and hostilities, the slave was able to preserve one more area which white could not control. (36)

One aspect of the slave culture represented both an African culture derivation and pragmatic adaptation to a new environment. In a new world and

old, African labours frequently sang while they worked. These songs served to set the rhythm of labour and express community values. They were also the means by which sentiments that might not otherwise be articulated could be vented safely. Attitudes revealed under these circumstances could not be punished. Just as in some African studies special days were set aside for the people to express in song, tale and dance, their true feelings about each other and their leaders.

Slaves followed the same habit in America though there was no formal provision for this and their compositions often had to be kept secret. Occasionally, however, a scene developed in such a way as to recall a similar African practices. These and other facets of slave culture operated then as a protective device and operate now as evidence of the vitality of African tradition. They expressed a sense of personal worth and encouraged the concept of community solidarity and salvation.

African-Americans have their own culture but due to the slavery and racism, the African-American culture is marginalized and dominated by white culture. Though the blacks brought their African traditions and culture with them during the period of slave trade but their culture falls into the shadow of the activities of whites. Whites began to subordinate blacks in every sphere of life when American captured blacks from the African states. Racial discrimination is one of the bases for cultural domination. The cause of the racism in America was the belief of the whites that their race was naturally superior and the black colored race was inferior. In *Race and Ethnic Relations*, B. Berry analyses the racial condition by saying “the phenomena which arises when group of people who differ racially and culturally come into contact with one another” (VII).

During the slavery, the African suffered a lot and undoubtedly there was cruelty and oppression. The most horrifying experience of black had undergone was the sale and buy of their flesh. In the words of Helen Scott, masters perceived slaves as “property rather than as people and placed property rights over individuals rights” (173). In this way, the belief of property rather than people gives the torture to the blacks. White forced them to perform manual labor, which the work of slaves. The matter took pleasure over slaves’ sweat and blood. They can not escape from their master. So, they remained colonized, oppressed and totally broken.

With the political consciousness that emerged from the political and social ferment of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the term Negro fell into disfavor among many blacks. It had taken on a moderate, accommodationist, even Uncle Tom, connotation. In this period, a growing number of blacks in the United States, particularly African-American youths, celebrated their blackness and their historical and cultural ties with the African continent. The Black Power movement defiantly embraced Black as a group identifier. It was a term social leader themselves had repudiated only two decades earlier and a term often associated in English with things negative and undesirable, but they proclaimed “Black is beautiful”.

The dynamic quality of the contest between ‘silence’ and voice in African-American culture and how this process has been integral to a wider struggle for political power and authority in the United States is significant. This concept of expression ‘voices’ takes a variety of forms: slave songs, autobiography, fiction, political speech, rap music and film, but together they create an alternative mode of communication through which the African-

Americans both state their own culture and assert their own difference; positioning themselves alongside often more dominant white mainstream culture.

In order to examine the idea of expression of ‘voice’ and ‘talking back’, it is necessary to begin with the heritage of slavery in African-American culture and its impact on the positioning of people of color within a framework of values dominated by the mainstream culture of whites who tended to assume the slave was a kind of “tabula rasa”. Against the white culture and white domination, African started to assume their own culture and raised the voices against the discrimination. During the enslavement, Blacks remained silent but political consciousness helped them to move from silence into speech. Mariani states:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the exploited, the colonized and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of ‘talking back’ that is no more gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject, that is the liberated voice. (340)

Lawrence Levine develops these arguments, claiming that slaves were able to create “an independent art form and a distinctive voice” (Levine 30). The importance of language and preserving the culture is a recurrent idea in the new history of slavery. They indicate an important stream of resistance which was conveyed through art of expression, especially song and story-telling. For through these, the community of African could articulate and understand their place in the world outside of the immediate horror and restriction of slavery. The past was not dead in these oral arts but very much present and real in the

authority of the singer. As African in America, they had alternatives that they themselves fashioned out of the fusion of their African heritage and their new religion. As Morrison's emphasis falls importantly on the phrase, "that they themselves fashioned" because it underscores the essential quality of self definition associated with these creative acts (190).

Baldwin's own writing sought to construct a place in America for the blacks thereby defying being positioned by challenging the white world's assumptions. The truth about a black man refuses to accept the white world's definition. During the struggle for civil rights, James Baldwin echoed many of these when he wrote:

It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and identity has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you. . . . I was taught in America history books that the Africa had no history and neither did. I was a savage about whom the least said the better . . . you belonged where white people put you. (Baldwin 404)

Collectively constructed cultural identity is an essential part of the freedom struggle. Cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" as well as 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as the past. It is not something that already exist, transcending place, time history and culture. Cultural identity is an important weapon which gives the self satisfaction. Abrahams wrote:

African American identity is much more than race. It is also the tradition, rituals, values and belief systems of African-American . . . our culture, history, art literature . . . our sense of ethic

consciousness and pride in our heritage of resistance against racism. (295)

All this discussion on black history shows that though the black history is the history of slavery, the blacks have brought with them their cultural practices and beliefs which have helped them create their separate identity. Shamanism has been a major cultural belief held by the African-American people in America.

### **Shamanism**

Rituals and ceremonies are central to different cultures under which comes shamanism. Shamanism refers to a range of traditional beliefs and practices connected with communication with the spirit world. It is a religious phenomenon centered on the shaman, an ecstatic figure believed to have power to heal the sick and to communicate with the world beyond. In this regard, Mircea Eliade says: “These myths refer to a time when communication between heaven and earth was possible; in consequence of a certain event or a ritual fault, the communication was broken off, but heroes and medicine men are nevertheless able to reestablish it” (19). This refers to man’s spiritual power that links to the spirit world.

The source of Shamanism is in independent invention and human psychobiology. Uniformities in different shamanic cultures reflect, according to Charles Laughlin, a biological foundation involving “neurognostic structures – neural networks that provide basic forms of perception and knowledge and the universal aspects of mind” (qtd.in Winkelman 195). So, Shamanism involves social adaptations that use biological potentials to facilitate community integration, personal development, and healing. These biological potentials are

provided by unusual, changed and high-spirited states of consciousness which Michael Winkelman calls “integrative altered states of consciousness (ASC)” (194). The biological processes that a Shaman utilizes promotes connections between the limbic system and lower brain structures and project these synchronous integrative slow wave discharges into the frontal brain. These integrative dynamics enhance attention, self-awareness, learning, and memory and elicit mechanisms that mediate self, attachment, motives, and feeling of conviction. A Shaman is considered to be a healer as Shamanic ritual provides therapeutic effects through mechanisms derived from psychobiological dynamics of (ASC), the relaxation response, effects upon serotonergic action and endogenous opioid release, and activation of the paleomammalian brain. (Winkelman 194). This shows a shaman accomplishes his objectives of healing by engaging the patient into different physical activities. So, Shamanism manipulates emotions, attachments, social bonding, sense of self, and identity, creating a primordial development of consciousness that constituted the earliest manifestations of culturally modern humans.

Shamanic structures of consciousness are manifest in the universal use of (ASC) in religious healing too. The psychobiological consciousness explains its widespread presence in ancient and contemporary societies. This makes shamanism a natural paradigm for theories of religious experience and illustrates the value of a neurophenomenological approach to religious experience.

The term “shamanism” comes to English from the Tungus language via Russia. Among the Tungus of Siberia it is both a noun and a verb. While the Tungus have no word for shamanism, it has come into usage by anthropologists, historians of religion and others in contemporary society to designate the

experience and the practices of shaman. Its usage has grown to include similar experience and practices in cultures outside the original Ural-Altaic cultures from which the term “shaman” originated. In this sense, shamanism is not the name of religion or group of religions.

Some claim that the concept of Shaman should be used to refer only to practices from cultures in Siberia, where the term was derived. This reflects a limited perspective on Shamanism, which is not an arbitrary or culturally specific concept but a specific complex of characteristics found in the magic-religious practioner of hunter-gatherer and simple pastoral and agricultural societies around the world.

The biological potential allow a Shaman to travel to and encounter entities from the spiritual or supernatural world. His soul-flight or journey involves manifestation of this self-referential capacity within the visual modality, using a non-verbal symbolic system. He goes into new form of self-awareness that permits transience of ordinary awareness and identity. Soul flight also symbolically represents "the Shaman's transcendence - a transformation of consciousness reflected in the meaning of ecstasy, meaning to stand outside of oneself? (Winkelman 201). This process helps a Shaman to contact with spirit world through the medium of ecstasy.

Shamanism is classified by anthropologists as “a magico-religious phenomenon in which the shaman is the great master of ecstasy” (Townsend 433). Another anthropologist Mircea Eliade defines shamanism as “a technique of ecstasy” (12). He further says:

He commands the techniques of ecstasy - that is, because his soul can safely abandon his body and roam at vast distances, can penetrate the

underworld and rise to the sky. Through his own ecstatic experience he knows the roads of the extraterrestrial regions. He can go below and above because he has already been there. The danger of losing his way in these forbidden regions is still great; but sanctified by his initiation and furnished with his guardian spirit, a shaman is the only human being able to challenge the danger and venture into a mystical geography. (89)

Thus, a shaman may exhibit a particular magical specialty such as control over fire, wind or magical flight. When a specialization is present the most common is as a healer. The distinguishing characteristic of shamanism is its focus on an ecstatic trance state in which the soul of the shaman is believed to leave the body and ascend to the sky (heaven) or descend into the earth (underworld). The shaman makes use of spirit helpers, which he or she communicates with, all the while retaining control over his or her consciousness.

### **Christianity and Afro-American Life**

Christianity is known a monotheistic system of belief which is based on the teaching of Jesus that he was the son of God. Christian regard Jesus Christ to be the anointed one, a Messiah sent by God the Father for absolving humanity of the original sin that has come down bringing death and separation from God ever since the primeval Fall of Adam and Eve. It is the predominant system of belief in America, Europe, and half of Africa. In Asia, it is mostly followed in South Korea, Thailand and Singapore. Not only in these countries but also its presence can be seen in all of the countries of the world in one way or another. Middle Eastern countries and south Asian countries its followers are still is in large number. But considering burden wholehearted Christian have been taking for the

words of God to the at most corner of the earth, as it has been outlined in the last sermon by Jesus Christ before he ascended onto heave to sit on the right hand side of the Father from whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. The last commandment by Jesus was to preach his teaching to all the nations, discipline and baptizing them in the name of Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Christianity is a religion which gives emphasis on the worthiness of human being. Christian believes that Christ had died for the sake of humanity. Mankind is redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ and will attain ultimate salvation; this is what, Christians usually call the passion of Christ. Radhakrishana says:

When Jesus says about St. John the Baptist that though he is the greatest among man, the least among the blessed in heaven is greater than the greatest man on Earth, he means that he who has seen the truth is greater then that he who has seen the truth is greater then he who argues about it and who has not the direct inward knowledge. (124)

According to Radhakrishana, Jesus' personal experience is a supreme example of knowledge. He was only righteous person who ever lived and he was condemned to death for the sake of human race. In Christianity, God is not indifferent to man's quest for Him. The sin and suffering are the inseparable parts of human beings, are closely related to each other. The origin of those sins lays in biblical characters Adam and Eve. However, Christian hold optimistic notion of Christ, who has already incurred the penalty for all human sins. Such faith in Christianity shows an interesting kingship between God and man. Lord Jesus says, "My peace I give you, my peace I leave you" (John 3: 28-30) which glimpse the relation between God and man.

Christianity is set of faith. A Christian belief in things unseen and invisible now; because God has said so, it is so. So, Christians are called believers too. But the faith of Christian is seen or proved in their actions, because belief without deeds is a dead belief. They do good works not to earn salvation; that is not something human activity can buy. But they good because God has been so good to them, and wants them to do good to their fellow beings.

In this regard, Holy Bible says:

You shall not kill.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall no bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house . . . (20:3-17)

According to Christianity, people should not make provision for the flesh to fulfill its lust. It appeals people not to be confined to this world, "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" whoever commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding, he who does so destroy his soul (1110).

Christian believes that the death of Jesus brought for mankind the forgiveness of the original sin of Adam and Eve. Because of the knowledge of good and evil is the original sin in which all human kind participated. Evil was the consequence of mans misuse of his free will. Evil lay in out of turning away from God. Man's fall was caused by his willful rebellion against the proper divine hierarchy. He was enslaved due to the passion of the lower order. Only the divine power could break the vicious spiral of sin. Richard Tarnas says, "Christ was an entirely external figure, whose historical manifestation with

which human being was at best indebted creature and wretched sinners. All good come from man's own sinful nature and carnal in origin" (60).

Jesus asserted his right to speak with authority about heavenly matters. He spoke of what he knew and reported about what he had seen. No one has ascended to heaven but he who come down from heaven, is the son of man who is in the heaven. In this context, George Ford expresses his views:

A sinner's natural heart is dead in sins and wickedness. This is true spiritual death. However, those who are in the heaven are spiritually alive, there is, therefore no place for the dead, among the living, and no harmony exists between the fallen nature of man and the purity heaven. Even if we suppose that a man with a fallen nature should go to heaven he would not find the things to his liking there because all his pleasure is merely physical. (68)

Confession for Christian people is the way by which people must surrender before the god and God will forgive their mistakes and worldly imperfections. Surrender is the excellent way to salvation by which the sinners are also given the space in the heavenly kingdom. There is no salvation outside the church. Jesus distinguished himself from the other Messiah, by stating that he was the holy prophet and who spoke about heavenly thing. His mission was much greater. He preached salvation and God's forgiveness for everyone.

Considering these positive and inspiring tenets of Christianity, one can doubtless conclude that it has solutions and antidote to the sins, evils and shortcoming caused by the human nature. It can provide answer to the world suffering from intolerance and division and unrest in all its spheres. It can restore

peace, order, justice, integrity among the human spirit with the sense of meaning, fulfillment and salvation.

But during the slavery in America, Christianity was the dominant religion. American history has been the interaction between white and black culture. During the slavery, Africans were separated from their family and from their own land. Due to the enslavement, they forgot their own cultural practice and follow the white culture. As in the Christianity, there is hierarchy between the God and man; whites think that they are superior to blacks. There is hierarchy between whites and blacks. Because of the color discrimination, Blacks were suffering too much but they did not get freedom from such types discrimination. As we know, salvation means saving from disaster, torture and pain but African-American did not get the salvation from Christianity, white dominated blacks. By realizing that Christianity as a white culture, Afro-Americans succeeded in developing their own distinct religious and cultural beliefs and practices in a manner via the adaptation of both white and black cultures which enabled them to stand themselves. In this context, Malcolm said, “The black man has been colonized mentally and physically, his mind has been destroyed, his identity has been destroyed, he has been made to hate his black skin, he has been made to hate the texture of his hair, he has been made to hate the features that God gave him” (Malcolm 263).

The chief weapon of colonization had been Christianity which had been imposed on black slaves to make them pliant and obedient. If African-Americans were to restore any feeling of self worth, then they had to reject the Christianity of slavery and segregation, no matter how pervasive it was in the black community. So, especially oppressed people sought for the appropriate way for

freedom which guaranteed their happiness and liberty. Some sought salvation in Christianity, whereas others in cultural practice – Shamanism. So, there is certain to emerge the conflict between two – shamanism and Christianity. In Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the conflict occurs between African-American's traditional values and Christian salvation.

### III. Conflict between Shamanism and Christianity in *Joe Turner . . .*

In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson presents two aspects of African American people's cultural tradition of getting connected to their roots. The events of the play dramatize the conflict between the shamanic practices as the power to heal and to manipulate the spirit world as it is passed from one generation to the next one and the Christianity which emphasizes on following the teachings of the Christ for human salvation. The action of Wilson's play takes place in a Pittsburgh boarding house in 1911. The setting is appropriate to the subject matter since most of the characters are displaced people, whether uprooted by the desire to find economic opportunities in the industrial North or compelled to flee tyrannical treatment in the South. However, their search is not motivated entirely by practical considerations--sustenance and safety; they are also driven by the desire for spiritual renewal.

Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, embraces and explores the African presence in America. By such "presence" he means the common/shared historical experiences/cultural codes that bind the "Africans" in America as one people. However, he does not essentialize black identity, chiefly for two reasons. First, four hundred years of stay in another land have made them into African-Americans, mediating/transforming their origins. Second, differences have also always existed between the blacks themselves in terms of gender, class and attitude to white America. Despite all ruptures and discontinuities at these two levels, Wilson believes: "I am an African, and I can participate in this society as an African" ("August Wilson Playwright" 173). This should not be construed as envisioning a separate black

America because Wilson actually advocates building on an “amalgam of ideas and thoughts and necessity and struggle of all the various ethnic groups . . . that make up America” (“Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks”). He emphasizes the distinctiveness of the black identity for a fuller participation, but as African-Americans.

As a shaman, Bynum is a “conjure man” whose craft is devoted to the reunion of lost and separated persons whom he ‘binds’ physically and spiritually (2041). Having attained spiritual illumination, he is capable of facilitating the same in others. Yet the racial ideology of the play suggests that, in spite of his knowledge of the African folk and spiritual customs, he is nevertheless torn between two worlds. His visionary sequence reveals the conjunction of African and Christian motifs. His quest for the “shiny man” is the search for an individual whose own spiritual awakening exceeds his own, the uncompromising African man (2042).

When the play opens, Bynum is described as practicing shamanism, which the boarding-house owner finds nonsensical. The play opens with Bynum's Shamanic practices which Seth finds nonsensical because he no longer believes in traditional practices. Bynum hires Seth's apartment where he performs his rituals. The whole place seems under the spell of Shamanism. Seth describes the place as “[sprinkled] with salt all over the place . . . got pennies lined up across the threshold . . . all that heebie-jeeble stuff” (2040). Seth has no regard for any cultural values. What he cares is about material comforts. He says:

I don't care how much he [Bynum] be dancing around . . . just don't be stepping in my vegetables. Man got my garden all messed up now . . . planting them weeds out there . . . burying them pigeons and what not.

He done drew a big circle with that stick and how he's dancing around.

I know he'd better not . . . (2040)

Wilson describes Bynum as a “conjure man, or root worker who enters from the yard carrying some plants, and gives the impression of always being in control of everything. Nothing bothers him. He seems to be lost in a world of his own making and to swallow any adversity or interference with his grand design” (2041).

As an expert in healing sick people, he asks people whenever he senses something wrong with people. When he asks Seth what the matter is with Seth, Bertha, Seth retorts immediately saying “What If I was sick? You ain’t getting near me with none of that stuff” (2041).

Moreover, Bynum claims that he can make people come back to their lovers by using his special powers. When one of the residents, Mattie asks Bynum to make her stray husband come back to her, he says confidently and proudly:

It ain't nothing to make somebody come back. I can fix it so he can't stand to be away from you. I got my roots and powders, I can fix it so wherever he's at this thing will come up on him and he won't be able to sleep for seeing your face. He won't be able to eat anything for thinking of you. (2050)

This proves that Bynum is a shaman, who has the power to heal and bind the people.

This paradigm of cultural resurgence is, of course, Loomis, who recognizes Bynum's negotiation with the ideology that entralls and exploits people of African descent and who lashes out at the ‘conjure man’s’ effort to bind him as he was bound to a Christian white oppressor, Joe Turner's chain gang for seven years: “. . . Harold Loomis ain’t for no binding” (2085). Loomis lost his religion when Turner captured him, depriving him of his family and his

freedom. Loomis now recognizes the collusion between religion and the racist state and cannot bring himself to celebrate the white man's God, who has demanded such sacrifices from him. Thus he wanders in search of his wife and his beginning. The "illumination" that is implicit in Loomis's name is not the divine madness of the Christian saints; it is derived from a more ancient source--the ecstasy of the shamanic practice.

Loomis's refusal to remain in the company of his newly recovered wife, Martha Pentecost, reveals his aversion to Christianity and particularly to Western ecstatic traditions. The name Pentecost, of course, suggests the visitation of the Holy Ghost upon the Disciples of Christ. Martha has maintained her faith in spite of the forced dissolution of her family. Martha also has a distinctive last name, in this case the new name of Pentecost. The Pentecost is a Christian feast that is held to celebrate the Holy Spirit's descent to the apostles. This extremely religious last name serves two purposes. First, it indicates that the Martha that Herald knew is dead, a fact that Martha indicates when she tells Herald that she waited five years for him before moving on with her life. Says Martha: "I killed you in my heart. I buried you. I mourned you. And then I picked up what was left and went on to make life without you" (2057). Just as Martha's name invokes the name of the Holy Ghost, it also implies the death of both her marriage and her former identity. As Anne Fleche notes in her 1994 essay, "The History Lesson: Authenticity and Anachronism in August Wilson's Plays, "when Martha shows up she's like a ghost (her new name is 'Pentecost'), and it's too late for her and Loomis" (38).

In addition to underscoring the death of Martha's old identity, her last name sets her up as Herald's main opponent, and sets up Christianity as the main opponent of African Americans who are in search of their own identity. In the play, Herald

denounces Christianity, starting with his interruption of the juba dance which mentions the Holy Ghost. Herald says to others, “You singing for the Holy Ghost to come? What he gonna do, huh? He gonna come with tongues of fire to burn up your woolly heads?” (2066). When Martha arrives at the end of the play, she tries to get Herald to embrace Christianity, and quotes Bible passages to support the idea that Jesus Christ will save Herald. However, Herald's response indicates that he is not interested in salvation in the next life; he wants equality in this life, and does not think he will get it from the white man's god. Herald says: “Great big old white man your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton” (2086). Since Christianity supported slavery, Herald cannot bring himself to follow it. In fact, his final act denounces the belief that Christ bled for humanity's sins. Martha tells Herald that he must “be washed with the blood of the lamb” (2086). This idea of blood inspires Herald to use his own blood to wash himself clean, and he “slashes himself across the chest and rubs the blood over his face and comes to a realization” (2086). This act both defies Martha's Christianity and affirms Herald's belief in himself and African cultural practice. He shares Bynum's vision of Shamanism.

A customary attribute of many shamanic rituals is the blood sacrifice of animals – pigs, goats, cows, etc. The blood served to nourish the gods or to transfer affliction and offense onto the sacrificial subject. Although the practice was uncommon, even human sacrifice might be conducted in a period of social crisis. Initially, the blood imagery in Wilson's *Joe Turner* has a decidedly Christian quality. While both of the play's shamans experience a blood baptism as an introduction to their vocation, Bynum's clearly alludes to Christ's blood. The blood-covered hands of the “shiny man” suggest the stigmata, and he invites

the neophyte to cleanse himself with that blood (2042). The action results in an initiatory vision that launches his shamanic profession. In contrast, Loomis's blood ritual is a clear refusal of Christ as the sacrificial subject. While his wife prays for his soul, Loomis declaims against Christianity's false pledge to alleviate the suffering of African Americans. He identifies Christ as an instrument of domination, encouraging African Americans to abide their maltreatment patiently and offering little more than abstract promises of happiness after death. Dismissing the idea that Christ can atone for his sins, Loomis explains that he has done enough bleeding to warrant salvation on his own terms, and it is at this moment that the play declares Loomis's "self-sufficiency," his liberation from Western cultural and theological traditions. Loomis's transfiguration into the African medicine man is complete; he has gone beyond the negotiated shamanism of Bynum, who still allows Western culture to define his spirituality. Just as Bynum's "shiny man" "Goes Before and Shows the Way" (2042), Bynum himself was merely a precursor to and facilitator of the newly enlightened African subject, and Loomis will light the way to the spiritual renewal of still others.

Loomis has sought Martha out only to deposit their child in her care and to make contact once again with the period of contentment and confidence that characterized their lives together. However, Loomis's journey into the past stretches beyond the gratifications of those happier times. He seeks a spiritual healing that can only be achieved by an older ecstatic tradition. Martha recognizes that he is lost to Christianity and erroneously associates his new allegiances with evil: "You done gone over to the devil" (2085).

The search for self-knowledge, inseparable – as it were – from collective cultural memory, is embodied in the figure of Herald Loomis, a former deacon who was snatched by Joe Turner’s men while in the middle of a roadside sermon and put to slavery for seven long years and thus got separated from his wife Martha and daughter Zonia. Loomis later finds Zonia, and together they set out in search of Martha and arrive at the boarding house run by Seth, a black man born and brought up in the North. The seven years of Loomis’s servitude and his later life as a wanderer allude to the continuum of black suffering and the need for a newly freed slave, to put it in Wilson’s words, to “search for a world that speaks to something about himself” as well as to “recreate the world into one that contains his image” (216). Out on the road, Loomis identifies with his ancestors who had also been separated from their tribes during the Middle Passage and the seemingly endless auctions of slaves in the New World. Christianity provided the early slaves with a temporary refuge from the vicissitudes of daily life, but the former deacon, who was concerned about saving others’ souls, now finds it hard to retain his own faith in what Wilson calls “the white man’s God.” Wilson doubts if Christianity ever served black interests, apart from conjuring up a vision of “home” transcending harsh physical realities, and finds in it “an image of God... which is the image of the very same people who... oppressed you,... put you on the slave ships,... forced you to work” and who quoted from the Bible to justify the “ordained” subjugation (Wilson, “August Wilson Playwright” 178). Loomis finds his Christian self all the more disturbing because Martha had left him for the Evangelist church when he was serving his term as a slave. He begins to realize that his “salvation” lies in his self-empowerment by way of rediscovering his African identity.

Loomis's crisis of identity intensifies as others at the boarding house perform the juba dance which, according to Anderson, is "an Afro-Christian ritual in which frenzied dance and ecstatic shouts mediated an experience of possession or inspiration by the Holy Ghost" (452). The play abounds in "folk images of Christianity" (Pereira 71), drawing on the iconography from both African and Christian traditions. African culture and Christian religion had long coexisted in the lives of the slaves. In the play we see many of the Southern blacks moving North with the Bible and a guitar in hand – symbols of an adopted faith and of spirituals waiting to be transformed into blues, respectively. Their African-ness was at once compromised and retained, giving rise to a hybrid religion, black Christianity, and forging an emergent Afro-American identity. But the battle of the African self began with Christianity as time went by.

Enslavement that survived the legal banning of slavery in the South and the trauma of ghetto life in Northern cities made the "Negroes" race-conscious, with the First Black Renaissance (popularly known as the Harlem Renaissance) making a declaration of cultural independence. In the "mystical climate created by the juba," writes Pereira, Loomis is possessed by the Holy Ghost only to be overtaken by "a more powerful, apocalyptic experience that emerges from the depths of his subconscious past—the vision of the bones" (73). These are the bones of the slaves who on their Middle passage died and got thrown into the Atlantic. Loomis sees in his frenzied vision that the bones walk over the ocean's surface or are washed ashore and get covered with flesh and turn into a multitude of blacks who separate from each other and start walking different paths. He must relive the whole experience of his race if he were to realize himself in America. It is not a return-to-Africa movement, but rather a return to cultural roots – a backward movement in space and time that can create his identity as an African American. He must realize that slavery is his history, too, and that

“despite the trauma of slavery and the subsequent degradation of the body,” as Harrison maintains, “the ancestors achieve spiritual ascendancy as they ‘walk on water’ and arrive in the New World with flesh on their bones.” “Inside the spiritual dynamism of the ancestors,” adds Harrison, “is the true song of redemption and liberation” (314). Loomis is walking too, but he must join others on the road – something he cannot do until he shines from within.

Here is the importance of the character of Bynum, a Binder endowed with the secret power to bring people together, a power which he has inherited from his ancestors. To find the Binding Song and continue as a mender of broken relationships, Bynum had to find the Shiny Man who gave him “the Secret of Life,” which consists in finding another Shiny Man among his folks who would carry his project forward. The first Shiny Man Bynum met on the road, who guided him toward his song, is, as Clara Odugbesan claims, “a mythological deity of the Ifa tradition in Yoruban Cosmology.” Odugbesan describes Ifa “not as a deity to be worshipped, but as an oracle from which people try to obtain certainty from uncertainty in any human problem...” (202). Bynum himself is not sure if the Shiny Man is “one special fellow.” He believes, “That shine would pass on to anybody. He could be anybody shining” (212). Loomis would be Bynum’s “another” Shiny Man because the Shiny man, as Anderson says, is “also the individual who has not yet found his song, one who searches for himself” (449).

Loomis would be able to join his ancestors only when he denounced his faith in Christian promises of salvation. Declaring “I don’t need nobody to bleed for me!,” he slashes himself across the chest. “Loomis’s blasphemy and bloodletting,” writes Shannon, “represent an extreme denunciation of Christian belief by an African American and an extreme act to compensate for its loss” (qtd. in Hunter and White

385). This is Loomis's revenge against a Christianity that oversaw the brutal oppression of African men and women, against Christians who believed that their religion authorized them to enslave the "Negroes." "The notion of Christianity as a religion of slaves," Genovese rightly maintains, "rose long before Nietzsche's polemics" which must however be credited with lending a sharp edge to it (qtd. in Pereira 79). "The Christian faith, from the beginning," Genovese quotes Nietzsche, "is...the sacrifice of all freedom [and] ... subjection, self-derision, and self-mutilation" (qtd. in Pereira 79). The baptized Loomis has got nothing beyond intolerable woes. He wants freedom in this life; he does not dream of it in another world. He wants to be his own master, not someone else to be his. So he looks to himself as to a savior. He cleanses as well as resurrects himself by rubbing his blood all over his body. This bloodletting symbolizes Loomis's "full embrace of his true identity as an African, free in the land that was once his dungeon" (Pereira 80). As the blood-stained Loomis shines, Bynum knows that he has found another Shiny Man and his search therefore has ended. Loomis becomes himself only after he has confronted the past bravely and drawn inspiration from his ancestral roots. He is reborn a strong African American, loyal to his origins and conscious of his allegiance to and rights in the land he was born in.

Loomis eventually finds Martha, but their paths divide. Martha sticks to the church which had sustained her throughout her husband's absence. Loomis cannot give up the song that he has just found, the song that was always kicking him in the throat and enticing him to recover it. It does not bind him with his wife, but it now connects him with the larger black humanity. Loomis had to find Martha, too, because he could not go ahead on his new mission without saying "goodbye" to her and returning Zonia to her mother. This is not betrayal but the pursuit of a new goal after

recovering a phase of one's personal past, once snatched from him, that however has to be left behind following the crucial rediscovery of a broader spectrum of life. On finding Martha, Loomis says: "I just wanted to see your face to know that the world was still there. Make sure everything still in its place so I could reconnect myself together" (284).

The conflict between Christian/American – not always made synonymous, though – and African identities reaches a different dimension in each black character. Seth has little sympathy for the Southern blacks moving to the North, for two opposing reasons. A Northerner not so much aware of the realities that force them out of the South, he criticizes them instead for the mass exodus. With greater social and economic stability that he enjoys as a city-bred black, he finds African rituals to be "old mumbo jumbo nonsense" and is somewhat disgusted with the Southerners' poor knowledge of the way of life in Northern cities. On the other hand, he has his own fears and anxieties as a black man who has to face uneven competition with the other migrant groups, predominantly white, and work almost round the clock to retain his position in the power game. This compels him to bargain with his prospective boarders, people of his own race, and also makes him intolerant toward them for their alleged laziness and naivety. The Christian and African selves, however, mingle harmoniously in Seth's wife Bertha, as Pereira observes, "providing her with a broad sense to define her actions and her self" (81). On the same Sunday morning she goes to church and comes back home to sprinkle salt all over the house to protect her family and boarders against evil spirits. Though a Christian, she remains "connected by the muscles of her heart and the blood's memory" to her ancestral tradition (283). She knows how to struggle for survival in a hostile climate and at the same time be kind toward others, irrespective of caste and creed.

There are “traces of Christianity” in Bynum’s “apocalyptic experiences,” says Pereira (81). Bynum, however, tries to transform Christian rituals into African mystical experience. He owes his mythological ancestry to the *Ifa* tradition in Yoruban cosmology, to repeat Odugbesan’s contention, “a system whose function is to promote orderliness in the world, one that corrects all wrongs by mediating between men and gods for good, and produces certainty where there is uncertainty” (201). But in Loomis, the African self flourishes, rejecting Christianity. As Pereira notes, “his life encapsulates and parallels the entire black experience: stolen and enslaved, forced to work on a cotton plantation, freed, separated from his family, reunited physically with his immediate past and spiritually with his distant past” (81). In the end, it is his spiritual ties with the distant past that lend him new insights into his immediate past and initiate a new journey that will redefine his African-American identity. Here, Bynum can be taken as a mediator between Christianity and African Shamanic practice. He proves to be one who resolves the conflict.

Bynum and Loomis are foiled by those characters who have been more fully assimilated into white culture and Christianity. The starkest contrast is with Seth, who is determined to achieve material success and who has very little patience for those African Americans migrating north, looking for the same prosperity that Seth desires:

These niggers coming up here with that old backward country style of living. It's hard enough now without all that ignorant kind of acting. Ever since slavery got over with there ain't been nothing but foolish-acting niggers. (2042)

Seth is very demanding of his boarders, insisting on advanced payment in full, and is preoccupied with maintaining a respectable house. His callousness is antithetical to Bynum's selflessness. While Bynum counsels and guides Loomis through his visionary trance, demonstrating charity and grace, Seth is only concerned with ejecting Loomis from the premises for creating a disturbance. He haggles with all of the characters over their boarding fees and threatens to throw most of them out at one time or another.

The most revealing aspect of Seth's character is his scorn for Bynum's religious practices. The play opens with Seth's derisive account of Bynum's magical rituals, which he refers to as "all that old mumbo jumbo nonsense" (2040). The expression reveals Seth's refusal to acknowledge any affinity with his African past. He is a capitulationist who wants to blend into the white man's world. His ongoing negotiation with Rutherford Selig over the manufacture and sale of dustpans manifests his longing for the white man's success and for opportunities to exploit African Americans' labor potential. He fantasizes about hiring Jeremy to toil in his new dustpan business. However, he does not seem to realize the extent to which he is a victim of the white economy with which he longs to merge: The bank will not give him a loan to start a new business unless he offers his house as collateral, a request which within the context of the drama is unreasonable. The representation of white material success and independence that Seth longs to imitate is Rutherford Selig, the "people finder" (2043). This shows some afro-American people are lost in materiality.

Selig, the only Caucasian character, possesses a name that, in German, means 'blessed' or 'ecstatic.' Selig signifies the attainment of salvation--'to become saved.' It is something of a curiosity that the playwright would include

the single white character in his visionary motif, particularly since Rutherford Selig is identified with those forces that have brought the African American characters to their current state of upheaval and degradation. Although Selig offers his services in the search for lost people, he is, by his own admission, associated with those who made it their business to separate Black families. Bertha remarks cynically that Selig “ain't never found nobody he ain't took away” (2061). The association of his name with 'blessed' may suggest the opportunities that are inherent exclusively to whites in a racist culture. Selig obviates white cultural domination; his blessing is financial and entrepreneurial success, a condition that most of the characters wish to share, particularly Seth.

The play itself dramatizes the effort to introduce African Americans into the American industrial economy of the twentieth century, and Selig's role in the drama suggests that the most enduring link between the characters is the acquisition of material goods. The only Caucasian admits that his progenitors have always made their living pursuing African Americans: His great grandfather transported slaves from Africa; his father captured runaway slaves for their owners; and Selig himself locates displaced people for a fee. These practices reduce African Americans to commodities and are precursors to the assumption of Blacks into industry-the same process that characterizes the setting, both spatial and temporal, of the play. Selig's salvation is his own exclusion from racial oppression and his financial independence. Thus, his name is ironic. He attains his ecstasy through consumer capitalism, through the 'selling' of material products. For him, African Americans are objects for exploitation and exchange in the new economy, as in the old. His efforts are thus another manifestation of Joe Turner's chain gang. He finds African Americans

and binds them to the economic system, demanding payment for his services and products which, in turn, necessitates subsistence labor.

The mercantile obsessions of Seth and Selig, as well as the sensual preoccupations of Jeremy, Mattie, and Molly, are antithetical to the spiritual yearnings of the shamanic characters. Both Bynum and Loomis do no work within the play, and this refusal to labor is a truly revolutionary practice within a modern economy. While Bynum's motivations are not stated, Loomis specifically rejects the ideology that insists he labor on behalf of white men and their ideology:

Great big old white man . . . your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton. And he counting what's the matter, you ain't picked but two hundred pounds of cotton today.  
(2086)

Bynum's refusal to participate in the economy is a refusal to accept one of the most fundamental social structures of the modern state. His rejection of familial ties and obligations is yet another means of rejecting the same order. The obligation to the family necessitates labor in order to provide for the material needs of dependents. The shaman's path is solitary and anti materialistic.

Eliade characterizes the shaman as a "specialist in the human soul" (8), the individual who is responsible for the spiritual and physical health of the tribe and who, in a visionary trance, journeys into spiritual realms to seek out and remove the sources of illness (5). Both Bynum and Loomis possess qualities associated with this shamanic legacy. However, Bynum's power is that of a fully

realized medicine man, while Loomis is experiencing the agonizing transformations that will lead to his own shamanic vocation.

The initiation of a shaman can come about either through “hereditary transmission” or “spontaneous vocation” (Eliade 13). He does not choose his work, but is chosen by the spirits to pursue a life as a healer. The medicine men in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* seem to be the unwitting proselytes of the spirits.

Bynum encounters the distorted image of his dead father, who tells him that there are many “shiny men,” and if Bynum ever sees another, his work will be complete; he can die a happy man. Finally, the father urges Bynum to learn a curative song – “the binding song” (2043-44). The above narrative constitutes a clever mixture of pagan and Christian imagery. Bynum's shamanic powers are a negotiation between the religious heritage of Western culture and the practices of his African and Caribbean ancestors. Bynum's experience is reminiscent of St. Paul's ecstasy on the road to Damascus, where he would encounter the crucified Christ and be converted to the new religion. The location itself near Johnstown may be a very subtle allusion to the Revelation of St. John (another scriptural ecstasy) as well as a reference to John the Baptist, who is cited specifically in the characterization of the “shiny man” as the “One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way” (2042). The shiny man's blood that cleanses Bynum is, of course, an allusion to the redemptive qualities of Christ's blood, and the shiny man's glow may be an allusion to the transfiguration of Christ, still another ecstatic moment in the gospels.

However, the imagery of Bynum’s ecstasy has a dual signification, one that yokes together historically antithetical religious traditions. Many of the same

attributes associated with Christianity are decidedly shamanic. The “shiny man” suggests the shamanic gods and spirits who are also associated with light. Fire is believed to be the “easiest way to transform body into spirit” (Townsend 440). Moreover, blood is integral to many ancient rituals, since it was believed to open the portal between worlds and nourish the spirits (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 201-02), and it is only after Bynum rubs himself in his companion's blood that his environment changes: His father's spirit appears; objects become larger than life; and his traveling companion begins to glow. The subsequent encounter with his father's spirit suggests the “hereditary transmission” of the shaman's vocation. Many shamanic (most notably Native American) ritual practices involve ancestor worship; the medicine man encountering the spirits of dead loved ones who inaugurate and direct his spiritual vocation. It is his father's ghost who urges Bynum to find his song. Bynum reveals that his dead father was a “conjure man” whose song had the capacity to heal, a vocation consistent with the shaman's principal objective – to alleviate spiritual and physical suffering through “interaction with the spiritual world” (Eliade 28). In his effort to discover his own song, Bynum intentionally selects one that differs from his father's, but one that, nevertheless, possesses a philanthropic objective. He will bind those who have been separated, and he is likely to be very busy, since every character in the play is searching for a lost lover or family member.

In Bynum's ecstasy, the father reminds his son that if he (Bynum) ever sees another shiny man, he will know that his work has been successful. There is an element of finality to the father's promise, suggesting that Bynum's life and work will be finished (2042). Thus the appearance of a “shiny man” at the conclusion of Joe Turner implies the consummation of Bynum's work and the

passing on of his powers to the next generation, the obvious recipient being Loomis, who has been chosen to carry on the profession since shamanism is an oral tradition, it is necessary for the practitioner to initiate and train the next generation--those subsequent medicine men becoming the new repositories of the cultural wisdom. However, just as Bynum altered his father's craft, Loomis will also find a unique song, the "song of self-sufficiency . . . free from any encumbrances other than the workings of his own heart and the bonds of his flesh" (2086-87). While Bynum's labors sought to reunite the fragmented and alienated African American population at both the individual and the cultural levels, Loomis's edification signifies the severing of the African from the American. His awakening is a refusal of the most basic tenets of the Western religious tradition. Unlike the other residents of the boarding house, Loomis no longer needs companionship to experience contentment, and he no longer needs the white man's religion to define his place within a culture. The binding of cultures that was a portion of Bynum's song is transcended by Loomis, who emerges as the new African subject. His "shinning represents a new valuation – "a new money" (2087). As indicated above, economics, the exchange of consumer goods and services for cash, is what unites all members of the modern state, but Loomis is a new currency, one that will not and cannot circulate within the white American economy. He is the resurrected African man, emerging from the degradation of abduction and bondage. Indeed, the unique goals of the play's three shamans signify the evolution of African Americans following emancipation: a movement from healing, to binding and reunion, and finally to cultural and spiritual self-sufficiency.

Loomis's edification as a shaman is a lengthy process, only the most crucial and auspicious moments of which are depicted in Wilson's play. The medicine man's craft frequently emerges from his efforts to heal his own suffering, and "the initiation of the candidate is equivalent to a cure"; indeed, his infirmity manifests his election (Eliade 27). Loomis is spiritually sick, wandering in search of his wife, who disappeared while he was in bondage to Joe Turner. He does not know how to renew his life in the wake of debilitating disillusionment and suffering, and his experiences with Bynum are pivotal. By reuniting Loomis's daughter Zonia with her mother, Bynum frees Loomis to pursue spiritual renewal: ". . . he is free to soar above the environs that weighed and pushed his spirit into terrifying contractions" (2087). It is after this apotheosis that Loomis is finally able to say goodbye to his wife and to the memory of their lost happiness.

The playwright uses an image of flying to reveal Loomis's liberation from his mundane obligations. Loomis soars "above" his "environs." Soul flight is, of course, central to the shamanic experience. In the midst of his ecstasy, the holy man often possesses the spirit of a bird and describes his visionary flight above the earth.

The image of Loomis's soul flight is an unmistakable sign of his spiritual rejuvenation as well as his election to the shaman's vocation. Only now does he begin to shine. Eliade's association of the flight with sacrifice is also pivotal to understanding Loomis's apotheosis.

At the moment of his consecration, Loomis proclaims, "I'm standing! I'm standing! My legs stood up! I'm standing now!" (2085). His elation over this simple task is the culmination of an image motif that began with Loomis's vision

of the “bones people” at the end of Act I. The vision of skeletal people drifting in ships, drowning in the ocean, and landing on the shore has proven a fruitful metaphor, signifying not only the slave trade and the displacement of African abductees to America, but also the disorientation experienced by the former slaves upon their emancipation and, by extension, the confusion and bewilderment experienced by Loomis following his release from seven years on a chain gang. However, Loomis's ecstasy is also related to the shaman's initiation. The dismemberment and evisceration of the neophyte body is a “commonplace thematic in various accounts of the medicine man's genesis” (Eliade 34). Similarly, at his “investiture, the novitiate describes being reduced to a skeleton by spirits who devour and then restore his flesh” (Townsend 446). Among the Siberian Yakut shamans, the initiate dreams of being ripped apart by a giant “hook”: “The bones are cleaned, the flesh scraped, the body fluids thrown away, and the eyes torn out of their sockets” (Eliade 36). In the genesis of the Tungus shaman, the novitiate is dismembered and consumed by spirits. Finally, they “throw his head into a cauldron where it is melted with certain metal pieces that will later form part of his ritual costume” (43). The Malekula ritual is recounted in more detail:

The Bwili made himself a bamboo knife and, cutting off one of the young man's arms, placed it on two of the leaves. And he laughed at his nephew and the youth laughed back. Then he cut off the other arm and placed it on the leaves beside the first. And he came back and they both laughed again. Then he cut off his leg from the thigh and laid it alongside the arms. And he came and laughed and the youth laughed too. Then he cut off the other leg and laid it

beside the first . . . Lastly he cut off the head, held it out before him. And he laughed and the head laughed, too. Then he put the head back in its place and took the arms and legs that he had taken off and put them all back in their places. (Layard 65-66)

Loomis's vision of the "bones people" is instigated by the invocation to the Holy Ghost in the midst of the African Juba dance. Denouncing the characters' continued reverence for Christianity, Loomis "is thrown back and collapses, terror-stricken by his vision" (2066). He sees himself reduced to bones and is particularly troubled by his inability to stand up and walk along the road. Thus the triumphant proclamation that he is standing at the conclusion of the drama suggests his restoration and his investiture as a shaman. He describes himself surrounded by "enemies picking" his "flesh." Yet despite his symbolic evisceration, Loomis is restored and is a "new" and better person. Asking incredulously if "blood make you clean," he slashes himself, rubs his blood on his face, and realizes that he is finally walking upright (2086). Loomis's enlightenment involves a rejection of Christian salvation: He realizes that he can save himself, and this ability allows him to heal others as well.

Loomis's edification is managed and manipulated by Bynum, who questions the neophyte in the midst of his initial ecstasy and guides Loomis through a detailed account of the bones people. The play suggests that Bynum may have had a similar experience when he saw the shiny man: "Then he carried me further into this big place until we come to this ocean. Then he showed me something I ain't got words to tell you. But if you stand to witness it, you done seen something there" (2042).

The lack of details in Bynum's account leaves the interpretation of the passage open, but Bynum's prior knowledge of the content of Loomis's vision argues strongly that the events for which Bynum has no words include skeletons on the sea shore. Loomis recognizes Bynum as a kindred spirit: "You one of them bones people" (2067). And just as his father introduced Bynum to the ocean of bodies, Bynum guides his own apprentice through this initiatory vision.

The conditions that instigate Loomis's ecstatic trance in the midst of the Juba dance are reminiscent of the shaman's possession that is an initial sign of election by the spirits. Drumming, dancing, and chanting are traditional means of invoking a mystical trance. When Loomis hears the Juba chanting, he dances speaking in tongues. Just as the shamans of the Sudan become possessed by spirits, begin to tremble, and lapse into unconsciousness as a prelude to their visionary trance (Eliade 55), Loomis, at the conclusion of his dance, falls to the floor and begins to prophesy. He sees the "bones rise up out the water, rise up and walk across the water" (2066). And he prophesizes about some destruction saying, "The ground is starting to shake. There's a great shaking. The world is busting half in two. The sky is splitting open. I got to stand up" (2067).

Wilson's play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* participates in the same process that it depicts. We can experience the transformation of the characters vicariously through the agonies and ecstasies of Harold Loomis. Wilson recognizes the antithetical influences that define African Americans--the impulse to assimilate into white culture and the impetus to extricate and maintain a distinct black culture, which helps them to return to their normal life. In his interview with Sandra Shannon, Wilson expresses his confidence in the "viability of a distinctly African American spirituality and culture" (546). In the play, even those characters most fully

assimilated into white culture are familiar with and participate in the Juba dance and are sufficiently conversant with non-Western religious traditions to appreciate and fear Bynum's conjuring. However, the play stages an apotheosis which, by example, urges the audience to move toward an uncompromised African spirituality and consciousness.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The events and the activities of the major characters reflect the conflict between Shamanic practice of Afro-American people and Christian practice of white people. Bynum, as a mediator between these two, exploits different means and methods which symbolize shamanism and spirituality. When he is first described in the play, he is seen carrying different roots and plants in his hired boarding house where he performs his rituals. His act of sprinkling salt and other roots all around the house and yard is a testimony to the Shamanic practice. Moreover, he dances around the place performing rituals, which the boarding-house owner finds nonsensical. He tries to bind and heal lost and risk people through such activities.

As a Shaman, Bynum is not only confined to African culture, he also unifies cultures. His visionary quality reveals the salvation of African American people through African cultural tradition. This makes his Shamanic power more powerful and universal. His claim to make come back stray people through his special power of roots and powder also proves his ability as a shaman. As a Shaman he makes use of traditional song as part of his shamanic practice, but he does not select his father's song which is typical of his father. He, nevertheless,

selects one that has philanthropic objective to bind those who have been separated.

However, another Shaman, Loomis is against any Christian beliefs for the salvation of Afro-American people who are displaced physically, economically and spiritually, culturally. He refuses to remain in the company of his newly recovered wife, Martha Pentecost, who fully believes in Christian way of salvation. He seeks a spiritual healing that can only be achieved by an older ecstatic tradition of African Legacy. He strongly believes that the "illumination" that is implicit in Loomis' name is not the divine madness of the Christian saints; rather it is derived from more ancient source of the ecstasy of the shaman. So, he rejects the rituals of Christianity as false.

Bynum does his election regarding shamanic practices. He recalls an event when he had rubbed blood on a traveler's hand and face for cleansing purpose that is for salvation. Following this rituals the traveler had begun to glow and illuminate. At the time, Bynum's father had instructed him learn a curative binding song out of many. This also inspires Bynum to embrace a holistic shamanic practice. In this way both Bynum and Loomis possess qualities associated with this shamanic legacy. However, Bynum's power is that of a fully realized medicine man, while Loomis is experience the agonizing transformation that will lead to his own shamanic vocation.

As soul flight is central to the shamanic experience. The playwright uses an image of flying to reveal Loomis's liberation from his mundane obligations. Loomis soars high above his environment. The image of his soul flight is an unmistakable sign of his spiritual rejuvenation as well as his election to the shaman's vocation.

The multiplying holy men – Seth, Selig and the like within the text are set off in sharp contrast to the more mundane characters, who are preoccupied with material health, companionship and sex. These individuals, who are more easily assimilated into white culture, are the very same subjects. Thus the playwright shows shamanism, manipulating the ghosts of our imaginations, healing the wounds created by four hundred years of racial oppression and cultural imperialism physically, emotionally and spiritually. So, the play reflects the shamanic practice of African-American people and Christian influence through the activities of Bynum and Loomis in the midst of economic and material development in America. However, it is the selection of one that resolves the conflict.

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