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Henderson the Rain King: Bellow's Festival¹⁾

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Every festival is a spasm of life for the renewal of the world. Since the dawn of history man has never ceased to celebrate festivals, in which rituals purify the profane and establish the sacred. Festivals periodically interrupt stagnant daily life and transform it into a higher dimension of life, in other words, the mythical dimension of life that is qualitatively different from any everyday mode of existence. As Mircea Eliade remarks, participants in festivals perceive the manifestation of absolute power, fecundity, and creativity in their ritual repetition of the god's mythical act. Man has symbolically regenerated the world by the annual celebration of archetypical achievements of the god's "cosmogony."²⁾ It is worth observing that influential modern American writers such as Hemingway, Faulkner, and Bellow utilize feasts as a vitally necessary framework of their important novels. The fiesta in *The Sun Also Rises*, the yearly pageant-rite in "The Bear," and the rain festival in *Henderson the Rain King* are three significant representations of festivals in twentieth century American literature. This essay places its focus on *Henderson the Rain King* and aims to clarify the meaning of the Wariri rain festival, comparing it to Hemingway and Faulkner's festivities.

As has been pointed out by several critics, Bellow's first safari romance to date, *Henderson the Rain King* may be read as a caricature of the Hemingway hero. However, there is something more to this novel. Keith M. Opdahl correctly objects to viewing it as a mere parody, paying attention to Henderson's underlying affinity with the Hemingway hero.³⁾ Robert R. Dutton compares Henderson with Swift's Gulliver.⁴⁾ David W. Noble points out that *Henderson* can be read as "an obvious national allegory,"⁵⁾ because Henderson is Bellow's first non-Jewish hero; he is a millionaire, a typical WASP, and a descendant of the old American

aristocracy. Eusebio L. Rodrigues insists that this story is a parable for all mankind, especially for the Americans. He is right in asserting that Henderson can be identified with America itself: "Henderson has to be seen as the embodiment of mid-twentieth-century America, bursting with vital energy, at the very peak of its prosperity."⁶ In physical terms, his terribly huge presence is parallel to the vast terrene of America, and in terms of spirit, the dynamic amplitude of his "soul energy" reminds us of a crucible of various contradictory elements that comprise America. M. Gilbert Porter begins his discussion on *Henderson* with the following remark: "As the dust jacket on one paperback edition announces, *Henderson the Rain King* is 'a feast.' The novel is, of course, a feast, both movable and continuous..."⁷ Porter follows up the metaphor of music, stressing the orchestration of soul music.

Before moving on to the analysis of the rain festival, let me sum up the meaning of the preceding sections: the chaotic outline of Henderson's life in America and his stay at the Arenewi village. In his everyday life, Henderson is harassed by his inner voice that blindly cries "I want, I want, I want." This troublesome demand symbolizes his desperate thirst for radical fulfilment in life. Henderson, who is in his fifties, is excessively horrified by death, even the idea of death. He visits an aquarium at Banyules and looks in at an octopus. The Brownian motion in the speckles of the octopus suddenly strikes him as "a cosmic coldness in which I felt I was dying."⁸ Henderson interprets this weird experience as follows: "This is my last day. Death is giving me notice" (p.22). Obsessed with the threat of death, he tries several therapies for fear that there should come "a day of tears and madness" (p.26). He ceremoniously plays the violin in the basement studio, breeds a good number of pigs, does physical labor, and roars at others, but nothing can appease his irritation. At last his fury precipitates the death of an old household helper, Miss Lenox, who dies of shock when Henderson yells out. He enters her house, where he is bewildered at the sight of the messy rooms occupied by junk she has collected throughout her life. Then, he is compelled to shudder to think that "death will annihilate you and nothing will remain, and there will be nothing but junk" (p. 40). Chaos and meaninglessness in modern daily life,

which the death of Miss Lenox brings home to Henderson, are shocking enough to drive him to leave everything behind and go on a journey to Africa.

In one sense, the Africa he travels to is the remotest place from modern America. The moment he arrives in Africa, he notices the greatness of a temporal gap as well as that of spatial distance. Africa looks to him like “the ancient bed of mankind” (p. 43). Without seeing any human footprint, Henderson thinks: “... it was all simplified and splendid, and I felt I was entering the past — the real past, no history or junk like that. The prehuman past” (p. 46). Henderson undertakes a sacred journey through the desert with a pious African guide, Romilayu, who takes him first to the Arenewi, a peaceful tribe of cattle-raisers living in, as it were, a prehistoric Golden Age. As the Edenic landscape shows, the Arenewi is an embodiment of childhood, innocence, and goodness. In the village, Henderson beats Prince Itelo in ceremonial wrestling and makes friends with him. Furthermore, he receives a hospitable welcome from the gentle Queen Willatale, whose aura he profoundly appreciates. In order to show his gratitude to her, he attempts to rid the cistern of the frogs. But he suffers a total loss, destroying it with his explosives. In an instant, his expectation of rebirth has been shattered and turned into a nightmare. On account of this fiasco, he cannot but leave the village. Besides being an introduction to his following visit to the Wariri, his adventures in Arenewiland play the role of a foil to the fruitful rain festival. While in the Arenewi village, Henderson vainly pursues the Edenic dream, in the Waririland, he actually participates in the pagan feast for rain and finds a key to his spiritual regeneration.

No sooner has he arrived at the Wariri village than he and his guide are arrested and thrust into a hut where he encounters the black corpse of the ex-Sungu. Henderson is frightened, but he takes it as a challenge to him and carries out the dead man on his back. This nocturnal ordeal of wrestling with the corpse stands for the retrogression into chaos and panic before the rain-making festivity. The next day falls on the rain festival: “As this was a day of festival the town was already beginning to jump, people were running about...” (p. 136). On his way to the palace,

Henderson observes people preparing for the feast. Young women are painting one another and putting on ornaments. Idols and fetishes are decorated and whitewashed. An old woman offers a sacrifice to them. The noisy sound of rattles, drums, and blasts increases in volume every moment. It is significant that Henderson has reached the village as if his advent were correspondent to the beginning of the rain festival. He is now given a hearty welcome by King Dahfu, whose noble personality deeply impresses him. In addition to being a fluent speaker of English, Dahfu is a man of wide information, because he has been in the civilized society to study medicine. Before long, Henderson becomes familiar with him and has a heart-to-heart talk with him about his spiritual predicament. He thinks of the king as a mentor, and the king is willing to assume the role of a therapist. Dahfu tells Henderson that like the Arenewi, the Wariri is suffering a drought, and he invites him to the rain-making festival. The Wariri's desperate need of rain is parallel to Henderson's urgent demand for spiritual fertility.

When the royal procession, consisting of the king, his family, Henderson, amazons, and warriors, arrives at the plaza where the rain festival is to be held, the drum noises, roars, and screams grow louder. The fetishes swing, and at least a thousand villagers painted in gaudy colors make as noisy sounds as possible. The chaotic clamor reminds Henderson of the last day of a year: "It was a great release of sound, like Coney Island or Atlantic City or Times Square on New Year's Eve...." (p. 159). Henderson thinks of the yearly return to chaos before the New Year festival. Although the day of the rain-making festivity is not really New Year's Eve, he associates it with a New Year festival, in which the world is destroyed and re-created. The villagers surrounding the arena wave red flags or red objects at Dahfu and Henderson who are in the royal box. Henderson notices that "crimson was the holyday colour of the Wariri" (p. 162). It should not be overlooked that Bellow dares to use the word, "holyday" instead of "holiday," putting emphasis on the holiness of this feast.

The spectacular rain festival is made up of two parts. In the first part, the king performs an athletic dance with a gilded priestess, using his father's

and grandfather's skulls in a skillful game of catch.⁹⁾ The young priestess and the priest, Dahfu, play quickly and gracefully in the arena. Fascinated with their movements, Henderson senses something solemn in the rite: "Soon I understood that this wasn't only a game, but a contest.... I didn't know but what the penalty for dropping one of those skulls might have been death" (pp. 163–164). Just as Romero faces death in the bullring in *The Sun Also Rises*, Dahfu defies his own death in a deadly ritual in the arena. The king, who is Henderson's mentor, shows him an exemplary performance. Having seen Dahfu's splendid play with death, Henderson realizes that "chaos doesn't run the whole show" (p. 165). Dahfu has established the order in the arena, and now it is Henderson's turn to perform a rite for himself.

In the second part of the festival, he accomplishes a crucial event. One by one the natives begin to remove the wooden idols located in the middle of the arena, except the mountain god, Hummat and the goddess of clouds, Mummah. Turombo, who is the strongest man in the tribe, can carry off Hummat, but he fails to lift Mummah. Observing Turombo's plight, Henderson is so excited that he is impatient to do it himself. His inner voice urges him to seize the precious chance, saying: "...intensify rather what you are. This is the one and only ticket...." (p. 176). Then he volunteers to challenge the huge goddess.

Allowed by the king, Henderson has a face-to-face confrontation with Mummah in the middle of the arena. However, he regards the goddess not as a wooden adversary but as a living partner in the sacred rite:

She smelled like a living old woman. Indeed, to me she was a living personality, not an idol. We met as challenged and challenger, but also as intimates. And with the close pleasure you experience in a dream or one of those warm beneficial floating idle days when every desire is satisfied, I laid my cheek against her wooden bosom (p. 181).

It is a pattern common to the bullfight in *The Sun Also Rises* and to the bear hunt in "The Bear" that two "intimates" confront each other as a "challenged and challenger" and become one in a ritual.¹⁰⁾ Furthermore, the consummation of this struggle between the two is similarly described

with connotations of sexual union. Henderson perceives ecstatic sweetness when he embraces the goddess, pressing his cheeks against her bosom. Then, he raises Mummah with all his might and carries her twenty feet to the new place. It is at this very moment that, like a mythical hero, Henderson has become one with the goddess.

This feat of strength revitalizes him to such a degree that he feels his sleep is burst. Appreciating what he has just accomplished to his heart's content, he is jubilant and filled with sacred light:

I myself was filled with happiness. I was so gladdened by what I had done that my whole body was filled with soft heat, with soft and sacred light... My spirit was awake and it welcomed life anew. Damn the whole thing! Life anew! (p. 181).

Enraptured as he is, Henderson understands the metaphysical meaning of having carried the goddess. "Thanks to you," he says to the king, "for giving me such a wonderful chance. Not just hoisting up the old woman, but to get into my depth. That real depth. I mean that depth where I have always belonged." (p. 182).

His achievement transcends a personal level and assumes cosmic dimensions when the validity of his rain-making ceremony is actually proved by the succeeding downpour. Henderson is sure that his feat will bring about a heavy rain.¹¹⁾ Rain is a symbol of fertility, creation, and rebirth. The pouring rain which results from his ritual, not only regenerates him but renews a microcosm of the Wariri, bestowing a favor on the whole tribe. In this sense, his brilliant feat of strength can be viewed as a repetition of a cosmogonic act performed by a god or an ancient hero at the beginning of time. Eliade points out the correlation between rain and the Creation, citing a saying from the Talmud:

The very close connections between the ideas of Creation through water (aquatic cosmogony, deluge that periodically regenerates historical life, rain), birth, and resurrection are confirmed by this saying from the Talmud: "God hath three keys, of rain, of birth, of rising (*sic*) of the dead."¹²⁾

A deluge preceding the Creation or resurrection, fuses all contours, returns

everything to the fluid, and makes the end of the world.

Heaven raining on him in torrents, Henderson undergoes the end of the world, which takes place before his rebirth:

I have never seen such water. It was like the Duch flood... I cried out to him [Dahfu], "What has struck us?"

He said simply, "It is rain."

"Rain? What rain? It's the deluge. It feels like the end..." (pp. 189-190).

Dahfu replies to him that the gods know the great thing Henderson has performed for the tribe. Sanctified by the gods, Henderson is required to become the rain king, Sungo, who administers fertility. In an inaugural ceremony before the rain, he is stripped of his clothing, forced to become a part of a howling mob that runs about the village, and at last thrown into a muddy pond. Now that he is divested of his old ego by the delirious tumult, the primary purpose of his rebirth is attained.

If the rain festival is an undergraduate course, his confrontation with Dahfu's beloved lioness, Atti, in the underground den is a graduate seminar for him. By making Henderson imitate the lioness and roar, Dahfu, who seems a Reichian therapist, tutors him to intensify himself in the present moment. Forced to live in the pure present by Atti, Henderson learns to reinforce what he is. As he confesses, Henderson has been, like most Americans, a *becoming* person who avoids facing the present moment on account of his adherence to utopian dreams. He realizes that he has to become a *being* person, who accepts the realities of life and exerts himself to live in the present moment. As Howard M. Harper clearly puts it, what Henderson has learned from the king is "to live in the present moment, the here-and-now, to use all of the power to heighten the intensity and meaning of that moment."¹³

In the lion's den. Henderson has completed the whole course of his life-enhancing education in Africa. However, what he encounters in the rite of capturing the authentic totem, Gmilo, is the severest fate he has ever experienced: the terrifying reality of death embodied by a ferocious lion and the assassination of the king. After his death, Henderson, who is anointed with his blood, thinks he should continue Dahfu's existence.

Aided by his faithful guide, Romilayu, he escapes from the village and manages to reach the civilized world, despite his dimness of consciousness caused by a high fever. Then he comes back to America, determined to enrol in a medical school for missionary work. He wishes to share with other sufferers in the world what he has achieved in Africa. He writes to his wife, "I do want to get my hands on sick. I want to cure them. Healers are sacred" (p. 266). The sufferer who has gone through the rain festival has returned home as a sacred healer.

In conclusion of this essay let us compare *Henderson the Rain King* to *The Sun Also Rises* and "*The Bear*" in terms of the structure of festivals; its common features and several decisive differences can be summed up. First of all, in these works, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Bellow have provided similar structures for their sacred festivals. Each novel has a totemic animal, a mentor who plays the role of a priest in rites, and novice protagonist. In the festivals, the mentor administers a pagan ritual with the sacred animal for the benefit of the novice. Their relationship may be presented this way:

	Festival	Sacred Animal	Mentor and Priest	Novice and Protagonist
<i>The Sun Also Rises</i> (1926)	fiesta	bull	Pedro Romero	Jake Barnes
"The Bear" (1942)	yearly pageant-rite	bear (Old Ben)	Sam Fathers	Ike McCaslin
<i>Henderson the Rain King</i> (1959)	rain festival	lion	King Dahfu	Eugene Henderson

The priest is profoundly connected with the totemic animal he loves. He forms "a secret society" with the totemic animal as the central figure. And the protagonist, who provides the viewpoint of each novel, is initiated into this private group, from which women are excluded. Jake is accepted as a *aficionado*, Ike is allowed to belong to the closed hunting party, and Henderson is closely allied with King Dahfu. While each protagonist is a white Anglo-Saxon American, each priest is described as, so to speak, an

alien. Romero is a Spanish bullfighter. Sam is the son of a Negro slave and an Indian King. Dahfu is the king of a primitive African tribe. This fact has much to do with the historical fact that Americans have revitalized themselves through contact with marginal peoples. Each priest takes an active part only in the festival. No sooner is the fiesta over than Romero disappears. Sam dies at the same instant as the death of Old Ben. Dahfu is killed after the rain festival, involved in a political intrigue.

At the climax of the festivals, the priest and the sacred animal meet as challenger and challenged in the arena. The description of their confrontation reminds us of sexual consummation. Furthermore, this battle with the beast in the festivals seems to stem from the celebration of the god's cosmogonic victory over a terrible monster. This fight is the core of each sacred festival, because it abolishes chaos and establishes the cosmos. *Henderson the Rain King*, however, needs a little more explanation. This novel is significantly different from the others in that Dahfu does not perform the rite of killing the sacred animal. Bellow, who intends to transcend the limit of killing rituals, gives free rein to his imagination and affords Henderson great energy to perform the vicarious ritual of raising the goddess, which is the substitution of killing the totemic animal.

If we pay attention to the differences of the festivals depicted in the three novels, which were published at intervals of sixteen or seventeen years, it must be noted that they gradually bring about more successful results for the protagonist's rebirths. In the first novel, Jake virtually fails to renew himself when the fiesta turns into a nightmare. In the second story, however, Ike accomplishes rebirth in the initiation ceremony, although he is less successful in applying what he has learned in the festival to the real world. In the third novel, Henderson opens his eyes through the rain festival, and the novel ends with his joyful dance at the airport of "Newfoundland."

The way each trophy is treated after the festivals, symbolically indicates the degree to which the protagonist's rebirth is successful. In *The Sun Also Rises*, the trophy is the bull's ear cut by Romero. It is given to Brett, who wraps it in Jake's handkerchief and leaves it behind in the drawer of the bed-table in the hotel. In "Bear," the trophy is Old Ben's

paw. Ike pays a visit to Old Ben's knoll and considers that the paw has been dissolved in the soil and absorbed into the cosmic life. In *Henderson*, the trophy is a lion cub which Henderson brings back from the Wariri village with him. He believes Dahfu is alive in the young lion. The different treatment of the trophy in each novel derives from the difference of the protagonist's attitude toward the main ritual. Jake is just an onlooker sitting in a barrera seat. He never fights a bull in the ring. Ike is both an onlooker and a celebrant. He is a member of the hunting party, but he merely witnesses the killing of Old Ben. Sam's acolyte, Boon, vicariously performs the rite. Henderson is not merely a participant in the sacred ritual but a central figure of the rain festival. He has become the rain king by virtue of his own feat, which is acknowledged by heaven as the following rain proves.

If Henderson is the embodiment of America itself, as Rodrigues insists, there is no reason why his feat in the rain festival should not reflect the collective desire of Americans for spiritual regeneration. His travel to Africa is a "mental travel" (p. 157), representing the ethos of modern Americans. Having achieved material prosperity, they were at a loss how to deal with "the biggest problem of all, which was to encounter death" (p. 258): In this novel, Bellow has made Henderson grapple squarely with this fundamental problem. Through the rites of intensification in the rain festival, Henderson has found a clue to the solution of this biggest problem. It is Bellow's strategy as novelist that makes Henderson's act in the fantastic African festival assume mythical intensity. In *Henderson the Rain King*, Bellow has succeeded in inventing a new myth of regeneration on behalf of modern Americans.

Notes

- 1) This essay is based on the fourth chapter of *Sacred Festivals in Hemingway, Faulkner, and Bellow*, which was presented as a Master's Thesis to the graduate school of Osaka University in January, 1983.
- 2) Mircea Eliade delineates an archetypal cosmogonic myth as follows: "...in illo tempore the god had slain the marine monster and dismembered its body in order to create the cosmos. Man repeats this blood sacrifice...." Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1959), p. 100.

- 3) Opdahl mentions: "Bellow's comic version of Hemingway's strong man is more than criticism.... Although their styles differ, both Bellow and Hemingway create heroes who vacillate between violent action and passive suffering...." Keith Michael Opdahl, *The Novels of Saul Bellow* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), p. 125.
- 4) Robert R. Dutton, *Saul Bellow* (revised ed.; Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), p. 92.
- 5) David W. Noble, *The Eternal Adam and the New World Garden* (New York : George Braziller, Inc., 1968), p. 220.
- 6) Eusebio L. Rodrigues, *Quest for the Human: An Exploration of Saul Bellow's Fiction* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1981), p. 115.
- 7) M. Gilbert Porter, *Whence the Power? The Artistry and Humanity of Saul Bellow* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), p. 127.
- 8) Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1959), p. 25. Hereafter page numbers will be cited in the text.
- 9) It has been pointed out that Bellow's description of the Wariri is influenced by his anthropological reading on the Shiluk African tribe. Rodrigues adds that Bellow must have relied on Sir Richard Burton's *A Mission to Gelele the King of Dahomey* in representing the Wariri rain festival. Rodrigues, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131.
- 10) In *The Sun Also Rises*, the great bullfighter, Pedro Romero, thrusts his sword into the bull and becomes one with it. In "The Bear," Boon, who is Sam's acolyte, attacks Old Ben with Lion. When he thrusts his knife into the bear's throat, "for an instant they almost resembled a piece of statuary...." William Faulkner, *Go Down Moses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1942), p. 183.
- 11) Henderson asserts as follows: "After this feat of strength, when the sky began to fill with clouds, I was not so surprised as I might have been. From under my brows I noted their arrival. I was inclined to take it as my due." Bellow, *op. cit.*, p. 182.
- 12) Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 63.
- 13) Howard M. Harper, *Desperate Faith* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967), p. 48.