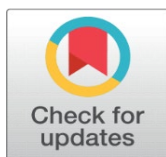


MAYA ANGELOU'S USE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN ORAL TRADITIONS IN POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Maya Angelou's poetry is deeply rooted in African American oral traditions, drawing from the rhythmic structures, storytelling techniques, and performative aspects of Black cultural expression. Her work reflects the historical and cultural continuity of African oral traditions, which have been preserved and adapted by African Americans through spirituals, work songs, blues, jazz, and spoken-word performance. By incorporating these elements into her poetry, Angelou creates a literary experience that transcends the written word, embodying the communal, interactive, and expressive nature of oral storytelling. A key feature of Angelou's poetry is her use of rhythm and repetition, mirroring the call-and-response patterns found in African American spirituals and gospel music. This technique enhances engagement and reinforces central themes of resilience, empowerment, and survival. Her frequent use of vernacular language and dialect also reflects the oral tradition's emphasis on authenticity and accessibility, making her poetry resonate with a broad audience. Additionally, Angelou employs lyrical qualities derived from blues and jazz, incorporating musicality and improvisation into her verses to evoke deep emotional responses. Angelou's poetry also functions as a continuation of African American storytelling traditions, blending autobiography with collective history. Her narrative-driven poems often serve as parables, carrying moral and ethical lessons similar to the griot storytelling tradition in West Africa. Moreover, she draws upon African ritualistic and spiritual elements, using poetic incantations and affirmations that parallel the structure of Black church sermons. Another significant aspect of her work is its function as a tool of protest and resistance, much like the oral traditions of enslaved Africans and the Civil Rights Movement. Her use of metaphor, symbolism, and signifying techniques critiques societal injustices while celebrating Black identity and resilience. Additionally, her poetry is inherently performative, emphasizing the power of voice and speech to transform words into a living, communal experience. Through her mastery of African American oral traditions, Maya Angelou ensures that the voices of the past continue to shape the present and future. Her poetry serves as both a historical record and an affirmation of the enduring power of Black cultural expression.

Keywords: Maya Angelou, Use, African American, Oral Traditions, Poetry

1. INTRODUCTION

Maya Angelou, born Marguerite Ann Johnson on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri, was an influential American poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist. She grew up in Stamps, Arkansas, where she experienced racial discrimination firsthand. After her parents' divorce, she was sent to live with her grandmother, which deeply influenced her worldview and writing. At a young age, Angelou endured trauma that led her to stop speaking for nearly five years. During this period of silence, she developed a deep love for literature and memorized works by Black poets such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes. This foundation later shaped her distinctive literary voice. In her teenage years, Angelou became the first Black female streetcar conductor in San Francisco before pursuing a career in performing arts. She toured Europe and Africa as a singer and dancer, absorbing diverse cultures that influenced her work. In the 1960s, she became deeply involved in the civil rights movement, working alongside Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. She lived in Ghana for several years, engaging with African intellectuals and activists. Her literary breakthrough came in 1969 with the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, an autobiographical work that explored themes of racism, identity, and resilience. This book was groundbreaking, becoming one of the first widely read memoirs by a Black woman.

She went on to write six more autobiographies and several poetry collections, including *Phenomenal Woman* and *Still I Rise*, which became symbols of empowerment. Angelou also made history by reciting *On the Pulse of Morning* at Bill Clinton's 1993 presidential inauguration, making her the second poet after Robert Frost to do so. She continued to write, teach, and advocate for human rights until her passing on May 28, 2014. Maya Angelou's legacy endures through her literature, activism, and influence on future generations. She remains a symbol of strength, resilience, and the power of storytelling in the fight for justice and equality.

1.1. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study explores the Maya Angelou's Use of African American Oral Traditions in Poetry.

1.2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

2. MAYA ANGELOU'S USE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ORAL TRADITIONS IN POETRY

Maya Angelou, a prolific poet, memoirist, and activist, infused her poetry with the rich traditions of African American oral culture, using its cadence, themes, and stylistic elements to create a powerful and resonant body of work. Her poetry not only reflects her personal experiences but also serves as a historical and cultural archive of African American struggles and triumphs. The oral tradition within African American culture has long been a vehicle for storytelling, resistance, and identity formation, stemming from African griot traditions and evolving through spirituals, blues, jazz, and spoken word. Angelou masterfully employs these elements to forge an authentic and commanding voice that speaks both to the personal and the collective African American experience. The African American oral tradition has deep roots in African storytelling practices, where griots, or oral historians, passed down history, wisdom, and moral lessons through spoken word, music, and rhythmic recitation. These traditions persisted through the horrors of slavery in America, where oral expression became a means of preserving cultural identity and resisting oppression. The emergence of spirituals, work songs, blues, and later, jazz and hip-hop, illustrates the evolving yet continuous nature of this oral tradition. Angelou, who was deeply influenced by these forms, embedded them within her poetry, crafting verses that carried the cadence and emotional depth of spoken-word performance.

One of the most significant aspects of Angelou's use of oral tradition is her reliance on rhythm and repetition, which are hallmarks of African American oral culture. Many of her poems employ a call-and-response pattern, echoing the interactive nature of spirituals and gospel music. This technique not only engages the reader but also creates a communal experience reminiscent of church sermons and civil rights speeches. For instance, in her iconic poem *Still I Rise*, Angelou uses repetition to emphasize resilience and defiance against historical and systemic oppression. The refrain "I rise" builds momentum throughout the poem, reinforcing the speaker's unbreakable spirit and linking her personal triumph to a broader collective struggle.

Angelou's poetry also demonstrates a strong use of vernacular language and dialect, which serve to authenticate the voice of her speakers and root them in the African American experience. By incorporating everyday speech patterns, colloquialisms, and the musicality of Black English, Angelou ensures that her poetry remains accessible and resonant with the community she represents. This technique reflects the oral tradition's emphasis on storytelling as a living, breathing art form rather than a static literary construct. In her poem *Phenomenal Woman*, for example, Angelou employs a conversational tone, directly addressing the audience and invoking the storytelling techniques of African American elders who pass down wisdom through anecdote and personal testimony. Another defining feature of Angelou's poetry is its lyrical quality, which mirrors the influence of blues and jazz, two central elements of African American oral expression. These musical forms, which emerged from African American communities as a response to pain, love, and joy, heavily inform the cadence and themes in her work. The ebb and flow of rhythm, the improvisational feel of certain verses, and the emotive depth in Angelou's poetry reflect the syncopation and expressiveness of jazz and blues. Poems such as *Caged Bird* evoke the melancholic yet hopeful tone found in these musical genres, juxtaposing sorrow with an undying hope for freedom.

Storytelling, another essential component of the oral tradition, plays a crucial role in Angelou's poetry. Through narrative-driven verses, she recounts personal and historical events, blending autobiography with collective memory. Her poems often function as parables, offering moral and ethical lessons that resonate across generations. This aligns with the African oral tradition's emphasis on using stories to teach and inspire. The Mask, for instance, builds upon the legacy of Paul Laurence Dunbar's *We Wear the Mask* but personalizes it with Angelou's own lived experiences, illustrating the ongoing struggle of African Americans to navigate a society that demands subjugation and pretense.

The theme of resilience, which permeates African American oral traditions, is a cornerstone of Angelou's poetry. Historically, enslaved Africans and their descendants used oral narratives to cultivate hope and strength in the face of oppression. Spirituals and work songs conveyed messages of endurance, often coded with hidden meanings of escape and liberation. Angelou's poetry continues this legacy by offering anthems of perseverance that affirm the dignity and strength of Black identity. Her works are filled with declarations of self-worth and survival, a testament to the power of spoken affirmation in the African American community.

Furthermore, Angelou's poetry is deeply performative, another characteristic derived from the oral tradition. Oral storytelling and poetry within African American culture are meant to be experienced aloud, with intonations, gestures, and dramatic pauses enhancing their impact. Angelou, who was also a skilled performer, understood this implicitly, often delivering her poems with dramatic flair that amplified their meaning. Her readings of *Still I Rise* and *Phenomenal Woman* exemplify how the oral tradition transforms poetry into a dynamic, participatory experience rather than a mere written text.

The communal aspect of African American oral tradition is also central to Angelou's work. Her poetry speaks to the collective consciousness of Black people, drawing on shared history, emotions, and aspirations. This communal storytelling approach fosters a sense of unity and continuity, ensuring that the struggles and victories of the past remain relevant to future generations. Angelou's use of historical references, allusions to slavery and segregation, and tributes to African American icons situate her poetry within the larger narrative of Black resilience. In *On the Pulse of Morning*, which she recited at President Bill Clinton's inauguration, she invokes a universal call for progress and justice while firmly rooting her vision in the African American experience. Angelou's poetry also incorporates elements of toasting and signifying, two oral traditions that involve wit, wordplay, and social critique. Signifying, a verbal strategy in which the speaker indirectly critiques or subverts meaning, appears in many of her poems as she challenges societal norms and racial injustices. This linguistic dexterity reflects the longstanding tradition of using humor and irony as tools of resistance in African American culture. In *Ain't That Bad?* Angelou playfully yet powerfully celebrates Black identity, using rhythm and exuberance to assert pride in a world that often devalues Blackness.

Her use of biblical allusions and sermon-like delivery further ties her work to the oral tradition of Black churches, where preachers employ poetic rhetoric to inspire congregations. The influence of gospel sermons is evident in the way Angelou structures some of her poems, building them up like a preacher's message, layering repetition, imagery, and crescendos to create an uplifting, almost spiritual experience. In *And Still I Rise*, her words take on a preacher's cadence, transforming the poem into a powerful declaration of faith and determination. Angelou's poetry is also a testament to the enduring legacy of African American oral tradition as a means of resistance. From the coded messages of slave songs to the protest chants of the Civil Rights Movement, spoken word has always been a tool for social change. Angelou, who was deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement, infused her poetry with this activist spirit, using it as a means to confront injustice and advocate for equality. Her verses serve as rallying cries, echoing the speeches of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, whose oratory skills were deeply rooted in the same traditions.

3. USE OF ANCESTRAL MEMORY AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY

One of the most compelling aspects of Angelou's poetry is her invocation of ancestral memory as a means of maintaining cultural continuity. African oral traditions emphasize the presence of ancestors in everyday life, often using storytelling to bridge past and present. Angelou draws on this tradition by channeling the voices of those who came before her, embedding their struggles and wisdom within her poetry. In poems like *On the Pulse of Morning* and *The Rock Cries Out to Us Today*, Angelou crafts verses that connect contemporary struggles with historical narratives. By invoking the voices of enslaved people, civil rights leaders, and forgotten figures in Black history, she ensures that their stories remain alive in the collective consciousness. This aligns with the African oral tradition's role in preserving history through spoken word, where ancestors speak through griots and storytellers.

Her use of ancestral memory serves both as a means of empowerment and a reminder of the resilience required to navigate oppression. In *Still I Rise*, the speaker declares,

"Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave."

This line encapsulates the African oral tradition's emphasis on continuity, showing how the present is inextricably linked to the past. Angelou does not simply recount history—she embodies it, allowing her poetry to serve as a bridge between generations.

4. INCORPORATION OF AFRICAN RITUALISTIC AND SPIRITUAL ELEMENTS

Angelou's poetry also reflects the ritualistic elements found in African oral traditions, where language is more than just communication—it is an act of creation, affirmation, and transformation. Many African cultures use oral traditions in ceremonies, whether through praise poetry, chants, or incantations meant to invoke spiritual protection or communal unity. Angelou, drawing from this lineage, incorporates ritualistic elements in her work, transforming her poetry into a kind of verbal ceremony.

Her frequent use of repetition, particularly in poems like *Phenomenal Woman* and *Still I Rise*, mimics the rhythmic structure of African rituals and incantations, reinforcing ideas through repetition much like an African priest or griot would during a traditional ceremony. This technique not only makes the poem more memorable but also lends it a spiritual quality, as though the words themselves hold power beyond the page.

In *A Brave and Startling Truth*, Angelou speaks in a prophetic tone, mirroring the ways in which African priests or elders use spoken word to guide communities toward enlightenment:

"We, this people, on a small and lonely planet
Traveling through casual space
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns
To a destination where all signs tell us
It is possible and imperative that we discover
A brave and startling truth."

Here, Angelou's use of language is transformative, urging the reader to see poetry as a sacred act that can lead to higher understanding. Her work often functions as both a reflection of reality and an invocation of a better future, much like the rituals and oral traditions of African ancestors.

5. ORAL STORYTELLING AS A FORM OF PROTEST AND POLITICAL RESISTANCE

African American oral traditions have long served as tools for protest, whether through spirituals coded with messages of escape during slavery, toasting traditions that critique authority, or spoken-word performances that challenge injustice. Angelou embraces this function of oral storytelling in her poetry, using it as a means to resist racism, sexism, and systemic oppression. Her poem *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which shares its title with her famous autobiography, exemplifies how oral traditions can be used as protest literature. The caged bird metaphor, drawn from the blues and spirituals tradition, speaks to the African American experience of confinement and struggle. However, like in oral traditions, where subjugated peoples used coded language to convey resistance, the bird's song is an act of defiance, much like the spirituals sung in the fields by enslaved Africans:

"The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
Of things unknown but longed for still."

This line captures the resilience and longing for freedom that runs through African American oral history. By invoking these themes, Angelou positions her poetry within the tradition of protest literature, ensuring that the stories of oppression and resistance remain alive.

6. FUSION OF AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN FOLKLORE

Another unique way in which Angelou expands upon the African oral tradition is through her incorporation of folklore, both African and African American. Folktales and myths have long been used in African culture to teach moral lessons, and many of these narratives carried over into African American communities, blending with new experiences to create unique folklore traditions. Angelou frequently draws upon folklore archetypes in her poetry. The trickster figure, a common character in African and African American folktales, often appears in her work as a symbol of survival through wit and resilience. In *Phenomenal Woman*, the speaker embodies elements of the trickster, challenging societal norms by redefining beauty and confidence on her own terms. She subverts expectations much like the trickster characters in African oral narratives, who often succeed not through physical strength but through intelligence and charisma.

Additionally, Angelou's use of metaphor aligns with the way folktales convey wisdom through symbolic language. Her references to nature—rivers, birds, and the earth—mirror the ways in which African oral traditions often use the natural world to convey deeper truths. This connection between folklore and poetry reinforces her ties to ancestral storytelling methods.

7. EMOTIONAL CADENCE AND THE POWER OF VOICE IN PERFORMANCE

One of the most striking ways in which Angelou continues the oral tradition is through the sheer power of her voice in performance. The African oral tradition is not merely about the words themselves—it is about how they are spoken. The emotional cadence, intonation, and pauses that speaker employs are crucial in conveying meaning. Angelou's public readings of her poetry demonstrate this tradition in action. She does not simply read her poems—she performs them, using her deep, resonant voice to emphasize key emotions and ideas. This performative aspect of her work aligns with the oral storytelling traditions of African griots and Black church preachers, whose delivery is as important as the content itself. Her performance of *Still I Rise* is particularly powerful because it showcases the way oral traditions turn poetry into a living experience. The inflections in her voice, the deliberate pacing, and the confident tone mirror the way African American orators have historically delivered messages of empowerment and resistance.

8. CONCLUSION

Maya Angelou's poetry stands as a powerful continuation of African American oral traditions, preserving the storytelling, musicality, and performative aspects that have long defined Black cultural expression. By integrating rhythm, repetition, vernacular language, and call-and-response structures, she transforms her poetry into a dynamic and engaging experience, mirroring the interactive nature of oral storytelling. Her work echoes the traditions of African griots, Black spirituals, blues, and jazz, reinforcing the deep historical roots of African American resilience and identity. Angelou's poetry also serves as a bridge between personal and collective history. Through narrative-driven verses, she connects her own experiences with the broader struggles and triumphs of African Americans, ensuring that their voices and stories remain alive. Her ability to blend autobiography with folklore, ancestral memory, and ritualistic elements demonstrates her commitment to preserving and evolving the oral tradition. Moreover, Angelou's poetry is an instrument of protest and empowerment, much like the oral traditions that emerged during slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. Her use of symbolism, signifying, and affirmation challenges oppression while celebrating Black strength and perseverance. The performative nature of her poetry, enhanced through her vocal delivery, further solidifies its impact, transforming her words into a communal experience rather than just literary text.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None .

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None.

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