

## SPIRITUALITY IN THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

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### Abstract

The article investigates the significance of spirituality in the works of the Black Arts Movement poets. By examining the poetry of Amiri Baraka and Maya Angelou, the study uncovers the various facets of spirituality that African Americans embrace, including “Africanized” Christianity, jazz poetry, and Islam. The article aims to show if spirituality is merely a way to celebrate cultural diversity or a vehicle for social change. It draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theory of minor literature to demonstrate that the Black Arts Movement is a minor literature, whereby cultural markers such as spirituality are politicized. Because spirituality endows the Black Arts Movement with a political value and a collective enunciation, this movement becomes a revolutionary force that aims to enact social change. This politicized spirituality is symptomatic of a desire to foster a strong, positive bond with Africa, which is an antidote to the strangeness of mainstream society. The remembrance of the African past through Afrocentric spirituality is a tool for defining and redefining one’s sense of belonging. It is also a quest for an essentially black aesthetic.

### Keywords

*Spirituality, The Black Arts Movement, Maya Angelou, Amiri Baraka, Christianity, Islam, Minor Literature, Jazz Poetry*

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## Introduction

The Black Arts Movement (BAM) emerged in the 1960s, an era that witnessed the rise of minorities' voices that decried invisibility and called for recognition. Writers of different minority groups produced many literary works to inform the mainstream reader about the experience of belonging to a minority group in the United States. The BAM gave the struggle of African Americans a new zeal that distinguished this movement from other African American movements. The African American critic and playwright Larry Neal (1968) points out:

The Black Arts Movement represents the flowering of a cultural nationalism that has been suppressed since the 1920's. I mean the "Harlem Renaissance"- which was essentially a failure. It did not address itself to the mythology and the life-styles of the black community. It failed to take roots, to link itself concretely to the struggles of that community, to become its voice and spirit. (p. 39)

To Neal (1968), the BAM is profoundly linked to the African American community; it voices its concerns and conveys its spirit. In the BAM, a work is deemed aesthetic because of the consciousness it nurtures and the power it instigates. Because the BAM is a committed art, the black artist's claims become "a necessity," "not a luxury" (Fanon, 1991, p. 210), to borrow Frantz Fanon's words. The revolutionary dimension of the BAM is emphasized in Neal's (1968) definition of the movement as: "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept" (p. 29). The line that divides art and politics is completely blurred since BAM is the artistic manifestation of the Black Power.<sup>1</sup>

Neal's (1968) two quotes stress the spiritual aspect of the BAM. He unveils another important characteristic of the movement in addition to the artistic aspect. For him, spirituality constitutes a crucial mark of the movement.<sup>2</sup> To Neal, the social liberation of the oppressed minority can be achieved through connectivity to a higher, unearthly source. The Black Arts writers create an art that is both revolutionary and transcendent. It evokes real issues faced by the African American community and touches deeper layers of the human existence through the spiritual aspect, which emanates hope and optimism. In his first quote, Neal (1968) attributes the failure of other movements to their inability "to take roots." Here, the word roots refers to the African past, origin, and heritage. The popularity of the BAM owes to its writers' stance of "psychologically extricating themselves from white attitudes about African spiritual traditions" and embracing African sensibilities by "explore[ing] themes of African spirituality, historical traumas, resilience, and perseverance" (Mitchell & Davis, 2019). Claiming "roots" activates a glorification of Africanness, including African spirituality. This article shows that the choice of the trope of spirituality in the works of BAM writers designates a desire to reconnect to Africa. It demonstrates that the recollection of the African past is deemed important because it aims at redefining one's sense of belonging and identity. Given this valuable role of spirituality,

the article reveals that in the BAM, spirituality is politicized; it serves as more than a mere cultural marker. Spirituality is a weapon to enact social change by pushing against racial inequalities and advancing liberty and equality. This study also shows that the political dimension of spirituality renders the poetry of the BAM a minor literature.

### **The Black Arts Movement: Toward Minor Literature**

In their theory of minor literature, Deleuze and Guattari (1986) considered the work of the Czech-born German novelist and short story writer Franz Kafka as minor literature. For them, Kafka's work manifests the three characteristics that embody minor literature: the deterritorialization of the language, the political value, and the collective voice (pp.16-17). The approach of this section is thus concerned with studying BAM writing as minor literature. Deleuze and Guattari (1986) suggest that minor literature's "cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics" (p.17). The BAM is imbued with a political value because of its strong connection to the revolutionary, political, and social movements such as the civil rights movement and the Black Power struggle. The political mark of the movement is prevalent in many works, such as Sonia Sanchez's (1970/2021) *We a BaddDDD People*, which calls for a revolution. Experimentation with the form of the poem-repetitions of letters and phrases, nonstandard American English, no punctuations and capitalization, and slash marks-instantiate a rejection of white traditions:

who's gonna give our young  
blk/people new heroes  
(instead of catch/phrases)  
(instead of cad/ill/acs)  
(instead of pimps)  
(instead of wite/whores). (pp. 27-28)

Sanchez's poem revolutionizes poetry's form. The disruption of these rules, as the rejection of Standard English in favor of Black vernacular speech, categorizes the poetry of the BAM as minor literature. Deleuze and Guattari (1986) define minor literature as the writing that "is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (p.19). A deterritorialized language is a language whose vocabulary, syntax, and accent are affected by another language (1986, p. 23). According to Deleuze and Guattari (1986), deterritorialized English can "be compared in another context to what blacks in America today are able to do with the English language" (p. 17). Black vernacular speech, with its African origin, is an act of reclaiming the ancestral roots and an effective tool to impoverish English; it thus undermines the authority of the 'major culture'.

Sanchez's poem (1970/2021) also calls for a revolution in the African American community. Sanchez addresses her black people who are in need of more than just clichés and empty words. Her black people need new real heroes who will save

them from racial and sexual oppression, from drugs, slums, and pimps. This call for revolution testifies to Sanchez's collective voice and indicates her awareness of her community's needs. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1986), the strong link that ties the writer to the community is a major characteristic of minor literature. They explain, "what each author says individually already constitutes a common action . . . literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation" (p. 17). Sanchez's poem is a committed piece of art that aims to raise the social consciousness of her community. The political and collective values that Sanchez's poem reveals are reminiscent of Neal's words (1968): "The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community" (p. 29). Sanchez's verses demonstrate that BAM's artists and writers are the voice of their community that powerfully articulates communal concerns.

Perhaps one of the most serious concerns of the African American community is the sense of alienation endured by the African American man. In "Notes for A Speech" (1961), Amiri Baraka pictures the estrangement of the African American man whom white America rejects:

My color  
is not theirs. Lighter, white man  
talk. They shy away. My own  
dead souls, my, so called  
people. Africa  
is a foreign place. You are  
as any other sad man here  
american. (Baraka, 1961)

Being a minor writer renders Baraka's art non-individualist. What seems to be an individual concern is actually a collective utterance. In the poem, the speaker represents any African American who looks towards the mainstream society and the ancestral land for a home he cannot inhabit. His skin color signifies his black race, yet by birth and experience, he is American. The African American is a sad man who mourns a lost homeland from which he feels historically severed since Africa "is a foreign land." This sense of estrangement can be surmounted through the search for the root, Africa.

### **The Return to Africa: The Ancestral Homeland**

The feeling of estrangement minorities endure in the US propels this act of looking back to the ancestral homeland. This search is indicative of minorities' propensity towards the US; White America is a locus of confinement for them. In her essay "The African Influence on Afro-American Art," Jones (2009), a painter and educator, suggests, "The influence of African Art permeates the entire contemporary Black art scene . . . In art, in music, in literature, Black Americans are returning to their Afri-

can roots and utilizing this heritage as the basis for their artistic and political expression in the United States” (p. 66). Africa serves as an inspirational source to accentuate the specificity of Afro-American art as well as an inalienable home; it is the homely, hospitable home which offers acceptance and maximizes Afro-Americans’ feelings of belonging. To fight against racial discrimination, minorities are engaged in the process

of “alter[ing] the landscape of belonging to the adopted country by offering new modalities of belonging which defy the conventional ways based on exclusionary or assimilationist attitudes” (Bouallegue, 2021, p.3). This new modality of belonging gestures toward a celebration of Africa. Incorporating Africanness into the American life nurtures a feeling of belonging for African Americans enveloped in an atmosphere of hostility. This sense of belonging lies “beyond the limits of an actual, concrete place;” this type of belonging is “nonspatial” (Bouallegue, 2021, p. 1).

In his essay “On National Culture,” the West Indian psychiatrist and political philosopher, Fanon (1961/1991), tackles the colored intellectuals’ desire to reclaim their ancestral home. Fanon highlights the similarity between the colonized subject and African Americans. He explains, “The whites in America had not behaved any differently to them [African Americans] than the white colonizers had to the Africans. We have seen how the whites were used to putting all “Negroes” in the same basket” (p. 153). Whites otherize blacks through “discourses such as *primitivism and cannibalism*” (Ashcroft et al., 1989, pp. 154-155). For centuries, Africa has been told in a single story, to borrow the words of the Nigerian writer Adichie (2009) in her talk, “The Danger of a Single Story” (Adichie, 2009). Before the sixties- the era of the Civil Rights Movement and cultural plurality, Africa was depicted as the land of cannibals and savage animals; it was the home of disgrace and ignorance. This discourse led to the demonization of Africa and the creation of a rift between African Americans and Africa. Malcolm X (1965) is awakened to the reason behind the crisis of belonging that African Americans endure, he notes “And since we all originated in Africa, you can’t make us hate Africa without making us hate ourselves. And they [whites] did this very skillfully” (p. 9). He explains the outcome of African Americans’ disengagement from Africa:

They ended up with 22 million Black people here in America who hated everything about us that was African . . . We hated our hair. We hated our nose, the shape of our nose, and the shape of our lips, the color of our skin. Yes we did. And it was you who taught us to hate ourselves simply by shrewdly maneuvering us into hating the land of our forefathers and the people on that continent. (p. 9)

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Similarly, Cook (2005) explores the myriad ways in which some African Americans refuse their “Africanness.” She believes that for some, “it is quite all right to have African blood if it does not show. The more Caucasian the person looks, the more readily he will boast to a black foreigner of his “Negro blood” (p. 191). Blacks have to push back against this simplistic image of blackness; they have to write back by creating other versions of the single story. In his poem “Ka’Ba” (1969), Baraka reacts to this image by disrupting the Eurocentric beauty standards, which are deeply rooted in the past of many African Americans:

We are beautiful people  
with african imaginations  
full of masks and dances and swelling chants  
with african eyes, and noses, and arms,  
though we sprawl in grey chains in a place  
full of winters, when what we want is sun. (*Genius*)

These verses testify to self-love; Baraka accepts and celebrates his African origin. Baraka accentuates the beauty and creativity of Africans; Africans are not brainless creatures, but they have an imagination that transcends the barriers and limitations set by the white man. In the third verse, “full of masks and dances and swelling chants,” Baraka delves deep into African culture to emphasize the importance of some of its most special marks. The masks and the dances have always been a symbol of ambiguity for the white man. The masks and the dances constitute essential elements in African religious and artistic performance. Amankulor (1993) suggests that the mask’s wearer is endowed with a sacred power that morphs him into a spiritual being. Through the mask, the African transcends the material world to become a spiritual creature. According to Amankulor, the colonizer was unable to fathom the power of the mask. He explains, “In the contact with the colonial administration the mask was a symbol of both mystical and political authority” (p. 140). The colonizers’ inability to understand African customs developed into scornful and harsh opposition to these rituals. Similarly, the colonizer could not view the African dance as “the main avenue of communication and is the expression of life and all its emotion” (Pittman et al., 2015, 245), but it was a mere symbol of barbarity. The African mask, which is imbued with a spiritual significance, is demonized along with all forms of African spirituality. This demonization is symptomatic of the asymmetrical relationship between African spirituality and white Western religion; while African spirituality is equated with backwardness, white religion is aligned with civilization. This otherization of African spirituality dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s accounts of missionaries, which described African spirituality as “‘pagan’ practices and ‘animist’ beliefs of the African peoples” (Olupona, 1993, 240). The colonizer branded African spirituality as “barbaric” (Boaz, 2010-2011, 219). However, when they returned to Africa, African Americans were able to undercut the facile claims about their past permeating the mainstream culture. Fanon (1961/1991) describes this process as follows:

Since perhaps in their unconscious the colored intellectuals have been unable to come to loving terms with the present history of their oppressed people, since there is little to marvel at in its current state of barbarity, they have decided to go further, to delve deeper, and they must have been overenjoyed to discover that the past was not branded with shame. (p.148)

African Americans realized that African culture and African past are not tainted with disgrace; they rather embody pride and dignity. African Americans' adherence to spirituality is their way to show pride in their African culture, remember the atrocities endured by previous generations, ignite the spark of rebellion, and dwell in the safety of their home. African Americans embrace different forms of spirituality, which, for them, will carry them back home, such as Yoruba religion, the spirituals, 'Africanized' Christianity, Jazz music, and Islam. African Americans turned to the Yoruba religion of West Africa, "their spiritual homeland" (Olupona, 1993, p. 10) as "a resistive act against the historical erasure of the slave trade" (Olupona, 1993, p. 7). Spirituality enables African Americans to remember the transatlantic slave trade and the pain of displacement. Thus, Yoruba religion relocates African Americans in that past and fills them with the drive to avenge humiliation. African Americans believe in the ability of African religion to provide them with "the sense of power and control necessary to generate the desire for rebellion, for revolution" (Timothy, 2002, p. 134). They also trusted its capacity to offer them "the cultural and spiritual sustenance" (Harding, 2007, p. 267) the way the spirituals, traditional songs sung by slaves, healed their ancestors "in a difficult new land" (Harding, 2007, p. 269). African Americans also adopted African traditional religions to feel a sense of unity with people who share their pains and hopes; a solidarity that defies the borders of nationality and encompasses all blacks around the world. Yoruba religion, for example, transcends Nigeria to Brazil, Cuba, and North America (Olupona, 1993). In an interview with Marvin X and Faruk X (1994), Baraka who claims that along with Islam, he is also inspired by Yoruba religion (p. 51), reveals in the following verses that the goal of BAM is the unity of all Africans all over the world:

All over the world  
Sweet Beautiful Afrikans  
NewArk Afrikans (Niggers too)  
Harlem Afrikans (or Spooks)  
Ghana Afrikans (Bloods)  
Los Angeles Afrikans (Brothers)  
Afrikan Afrikans (Ndugu)  
West Indian Afrikans (Hey Man)  
South American Afrikans (Hermano!)  
Francophone Afrikans (Monsieur)  
Anglophone Afrikans (Mister Man)  
Anywhere Africans. (Baraka, 1979, p. 230)

These verses evoke Baraka's Pan-African feelings, which articulate the unified sentiment or consciousness of all people of African ancestry against their oppressors. This unity is not only symbolic of a connection to Africa and its past, but it also carries a hope for political, economic, social, and cultural liberation.

### **Maya Angelou and the 'Africanized Christianity'**

As minor literature, BAM is a revolutionary force that seeks social change; according to Deleuze and Guattari (1986), "There is nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor" (p. 26). Maya Angelou is one of the BAM writers who through her art, aims at supporting and uplifting the black community. In an interview with Tate (1999), Angelou tackles the theme of protest in her works. She states, "Protest is an inherent part of my work. You can't just not write about protest themes or not sing about them. It's a part of life. If I don't agree with a part of life, then my work has to address it" (p.155). The quote emphasizes the link between the writing of BAM and minor literature. Here, Angelou stresses the inevitability of representing protest themes in her writing. Angelou's volume of poetry *Just Give me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die* (1971) is considered a strong addition to the BAM's creativity for its strong and blatant opposition to racism. One of the strongest expressions against racism is Angelou's poem "My Guilt" from her volume *Just Give me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die* :

My guilt is "slavery's chains," too long  
the clang of iron falls down the years.  
This brother's sold, this sister's gone,  
is bitter wax, lining my ears.  
My guilt made music with the tears.  
My crime is "heroes, dead and gone,"  
dead Vesey, Turner, Gabriel,  
dead Malcolm, Marcus, Martin King  
They fought too hard, they loved too well.  
My crime is I'm alive to tell. (Angelou, 1994)

In the first stanza of the poem, Angelou returns to the past of slavery to unveil the pain of this experience. Angelou's powerful words paint a vivid picture of the continued struggle for freedom and equality, inspiring reflection on the ongoing effects of this dark chapter in history because "slavery's chains" are very long. Her remembrances harbor sorrow; she is filled with the pain of all African Americans who endured slavery. She hints at the distressing outcome of this experience; the disunity of African American family is the bitterest consequence of slavery. In recalling slavery, Angelou feels guilty; it is a feeling of guilt that stems from a sense of helplessness. Angelou who still carries the burdens of racism, underestimates her efforts in breaking its chains. In the second stanza of the poem, Angelou bitterly articulates her powerlessness. Her efforts pale in comparison with the sacrifices of



African American heroes such as Gabriel, Malcolm, and Martin Luther King; these African Americans fought fiercely against injustices. She realizes that she must accurately and credibly portray the struggles of the heroes who have paved the way for change. With unwavering determination, she commits herself to capturing the essence of their battles and triumphs through her writing.

In her struggle against injustices, Angelou employs spirituality as a political weapon. She undoubtedly thinks that the liberation of African Americans can be “made possible and sustained by a firm belief in God and the undaunted practice of spirituality and culture as forces for liberating and effecting positive reality” (Stewart, 1997, p. 3). Angelou is a writer who valorizes religion, “When I found that I knew not only that there was God but that I was a child of God, when I understood that, when I comprehended that, more than that, when I internalized that, ingested that, I became courageous” (*Maya Angelou Quote*). The quote illustrates the centrality of religion and spirituality in Angelou’s life, it demonstrates the fact that religion and spirituality are an integral part of Angelou’s life and that they are the fuel of her bravery. Spirituality also fuels her art; in her poem “The Mothering Blackness,” Angelou employs spirituality to paint a beautiful image of the African American family:

She came down creeping  
here to the black arms waiting  
now to the warm heart waiting  
rime of alien dreams befrosts her rich brown face  
She came down creeping

She came home blameless  
black yet as Hagar’s daughter  
tall as was Sheba’s daughter  
threats of northern winds die on the desert’s face  
She came home blameless. (Angelou,1994)

The poem presents the family as a source of support, love, and cultural heritage for African Americans. It narrates the return of the African American girl to her mother to seek help and relief from social pressures. The black girl carries neither blame nor fear because she is in the presence of a strong mother. Here, Angelou departs from Western literature’s idealization of individualism. In her poem, the family is not deemed a handicap to the individual’s emancipation; rather, it is a force that nurtures and toughens the individual. In the last stanza, Angelou praises the black mother’s strength and beauty by comparing the African American woman and two exceptional women in the bible. The African American mother has the power of Hagar.<sup>3</sup> In *Reimagining Hagar: Blackness and Bible*, Junior (2019) suggests that, “In some instances, given its emphasis on the African presence in biblical lands and people, such research identified Hagar as African, and by extension, as a Black woman” (p. 101). Angelou highlights the similarity between the story of Hagar and

the fight of the African American woman. The similarity between these two women goes beyond black skin; both endured the pain of rejection, yet they showed strong resilience. Despite the suffering, these women did not surrender the role of empowering the family; the black mother nurtures her daughter the way Hagar feeds Ishmael love and warmth in the wilderness of the desert. The beauty and the courage of the black mother are also evoked through a reference to the Queen of Sheba. The Queen of Sheba is an important story featured first in the Bible, the Quran, and later in the Ethiopian work, *Kebrä Negast*. In the Bible, the Queen of Sheba travels to Jerusalem to test the wisdom of King Solomon and offers him precious gifts before returning home. Uncertainty surrounds the exact location of the Queen of Sheba's home, the possibilities hover between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Southern Arabia (Mark 2018). The Queen of Sheba's story is a tale that highlights the

power of women; therefore, Angelou employs this story to accentuate the power of black women. As an African American woman, Angelou feels that she needs the power of the women of her heritage. She uses the Queen of Sheba as a source of inspiration; she is a female model that Angelou presents to her audience to remind African American women of the glories of their female ancestors.

Angelou wrote "The Mothering Blackness," after her trip to Africa, which shows that the mother-daughter relationship is not the only relationship the poem pivots around. It also explores the return of the African American woman to her roots and to her home. Africa is the loving, welcoming mother who bestows love and support on her offspring. The choice of these religious figures – Hagar and the Queen of Sheba – whom Angelou sees as African ancestors, is indicative of Angelou's metaphorical return to Africa in the poem; it is a trip that strengthens the bond between African Americans and Africa. Angelou's poem shows that BAM writers and artists carry Africa in their arts the way the snail carries its home, to borrow Norman Manea's (2008) description of Franz Kafka's writing. Manea believes that Yiddish in Kafka's works is emblematic of a home that soothes the strangeness of the German language (p. 2). BAM writers and artists carry the ancestral home to heal the wounds of rejection and empower the oppressed.

Angelou's *And Still I Rise* volume of poetry (1978) is another work that aims to empower African Americans. It evokes a sense of racial pride and a strong anger

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against racism through the vehicle of spirituality. In her poem, “Just Like a Job” from the volume of *And Still I Rise*, Angelou connects to God and complains:

My Lord, my Lord,  
Long have I cried out to Thee  
In the heat of the sun,  
The cool of the moon,  
My screams searched the heavens for Thee.  
My God,  
When my blanket was nothing but dew,  
Rags and bones  
Were all I owned,  
I chanted Your name  
Just like Job. (Angelou,1994)

Amidst the pain and loneliness, the speaker cries out to the Lord for help, she is conscious that God can hear her cries and soothe her pain. She reports the crimes of the white man against her community. Although poverty and inequality mark her world, the speaker trusts God, “You said to trust in Your Love/ And I’m trusting/ You said to call on Your name/And I’m calling” (Angelou, 1994). She trusts His power to ease her suffering. Christianity plays a crucial role in shaping Maya Angelou’s art; however, the way Angelou employs Christianity echoes the portrayal of Christianity in the works of many African American women writers.

In an essay titled “On the Issue of Roles,” the influential member of BAM, Bambara (2005), casts light on the role of the black woman in the struggle. Bambara claims that the well-defined, demarcated roles assigned to men and women are a creation of Western society. She clearly rejects the definition of the man as the sole “breadwinner” and the woman as “the helpmate.” Bambara urges her readers to transcend these rigid definitions of “manhood and femininity” towards a broad concept of “blackhood.” Bambara, who explores the woman’s role in ancient societies, such as African society, argues, “prior to the European obsession of property as a basis for social organization, and prior to the introduction of Christianity, a religion fraught with male anxiety and vilification of women, communities were egalitarian and cooperative” (p. 126). According to Bambara, Western and Christian teachings were the means that justify the subjugation of women. Before the coming of the colonizer, the African society sustained a flexible concept of womanhood. The African woman was “neither subordinate nor dominant”; she was a participant in decision making (Bambara, 2005, p. 126). Many female black writers such as Carolyn Rodgers in her *Songs of a Black Bird* (1969) and Gwendolyn Brooks’s “God works in a mysterious way” (1945) view Christianity from a different perspective. These writers adopt Christianity but adapt it to their lives and concerns, whereby they ascribe a revolutionary Africanness to Christianity. Angelou’s view of Christianity aligns with that of Bambara and other African American writers. She expresses this opinion in her volume *And Still I Rise* through the poem, “Thank you, Lord”:

I see You  
Brown-skinned,  
Neat Afro,  
Full lips,  
A little goatee.  
A Malcolm,  
Martin,  
Du Bois.  
Sunday services become sweeter when you're Black,  
Then I don't have to explain why  
I was out balling the town down,  
Saturday night. (Angelou, 1994)

In these verses, the speaker refuses the image of God as a white male. She is conscious that a white God cannot understand her and would not attend to her needs as a black woman. A white God will never answer her prayers and will not support her the way Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and W.E.B. Du Bois would sustain African Americans. The black God is not a vision that is strictly embraced by Maya Angelou, the Black Arts poet Nikki Giovanni (1992) also asserts that "God has to be black." Through this vision, Giovanni claims a kind of spirituality that corresponds with Blackness. In a conversation, Giovanni tackles the issue of Christianity:

Many poets deal with the religious experience, in one form or the other. Does Nikki Giovanni? 'I'm spiritual. I can't negate religion (established). I believe in God I believe that God is everywhere. God is love. I believe that God has to be black . . . I believe that the Church is a great archive of black music. I wouldn't go to a church that didn't have black music'. (Giovanni, 1992, p. 4)

In these words, Giovanni reshapes religion to serve African American needs. The Black church has always been more than a space to worship God; the music played in the church, such as the Negro Spirituals, and the black gospel are uplifting and strengthening; they embody hope and resistance to racial oppression.

### **Amiri Baraka and Jazz Poetry**

Doubtless, there is a powerful connection between spirituality and music in the African American community that warrants further investigation. The importance of music to African Americans owes to African Americans' attachment to their African culture where music plays a pivotal role in all aspects of life, particularly spirituality. Roberts (1994) notes, "music is at the center of life for Africans and their descendants in the New World. Music is also at the heart of African and Afro-American religious experience. Blacks carry the rhythm of their music with them to church" (p. 121). This fusion of music and spirituality becomes a powerful tool for African Americans to convey their message of resilience, resistance, and cultural pride. The

combination of music and spirituality creates a unique and compelling artistic form that not only resonates with the African American community but also serves as a testament to the enduring legacy of African cultural traditions. The Black Arts poets' incorporation of jazz into their works solidifies the connection between their art and spirituality. The rhythmic cadence of their poetry often mirrors the musicality of jazz, creating a dynamic and immersive experience for the audience.

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The incorporation of jazz into poetry dates back to the 1920s in the writing of “Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown” (Phalafala, 2017, para. 8). On the work of Hughes, Phalafala (2017) thinks that, “By working within the tradition of orality, black music and related forms, Hughes achieved a collective voice of tradition” (para. 9). One could argue that another element that makes literature of the BAM a minor literature is jazz music. The collective voice of orality, which stems from the collective memories of the minor community, nurtures the bond between the artist and the minor community; minorities cling to their racial and ethnic traditions to counter the pressure of assimilation to the prevailing culture. The fusion between the oral and the textual is a form of deterritorialization of genres. In their definition of deterritorialization, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue that it is “the movement by which ‘one’ leaves the territory” (p.508). Accordingly, BAM does not only deterritorialize linguistic territories through the use of Black vernacular English, but it also deterritorializes the literary genre of the poem through the use of jazz to create what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to as “something new” (p. 280). This “new thing” is an experimental poetry that is an imitation of jazz. A Jazz poem is “is any poem that has been informed by jazz music. The influence can be in the subject of the poem or in the rhythms, but one should not necessarily exclude the other” (Feinstein, 1997, p. 2).

This experimentation with poetry is “part of the quest for an essentially black aesthetic by Black Arts writers” (Phalafala, 2017 para. 12). This experimentation enables Black Arts poets to create a unique artistic voice that stresses the specificity of African American art. As a member and a founder of BAM, Baraka is known for his experimentation with poetry, whereby “his performances of poetry with jazz would help set the stage for the emergence of hip-hop” (Teague, 2016, p. 1). On his experimentation with poetry, Baraka claims, “I wanted to go from rhythm and blues to new music, to Africa at will” (Baraka, 2003, as cited in Teague, 2016). Baraka creates a new poetry that takes him to Africa through a spiritual voyage. Black Arts poets claim Africa through the literary device of “Nommo.” It is believed that some African Americans, many of whom belong to BAM, employ the device of “Nommo,” a jazz characteristic (Harrison, 1972, para. xiv). Asante (2003) defines the Nommo as follows:

[T]he generative and productive power of the spoken word, in African discourse with respect to resistance to the dominant racist ideology. In the oratorical experience, much as in the jazz experience, the African person finds the ability to construct a discourse reality capable of calling forth nommo in every instance of communication. (p.51)

To African Americans, Nommo refers to the sustaining power of the spoken word; it is a power that can alter reality by provoking a spiritual state. According to Asante (2003), creating Nommo requires an interactive atmosphere. In my opinion, characteristics of jazz music, such as the improvisation and the call and response technique, which strengthen the oneness between the performer and the audience, can generate an instance of communication whereby Nommo creates a new social reality for blacks. In “The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs. Negro” (1968), Giovanni converses with the audience; she employs the question-response technique, “Can you kill nigger Huh? nigger can you kill,” to incite a revolutionary action which aims at killing the hegemonic forces of White supremacy:

Nigger  
Can you kill  
Can you kill  
Can a nigger kill  
Can a nigger kill a honkie  
Can a nigger kill the Man  
Can you kill nigger  
Huh? nigger can you  
kill. (Giovanni, 1968)

The combination of jazz and poetry metamorphoses the poet into “the leader of rebellion against postwar conformity and the spiritual agent of the politically powerless” (Thomas, 1992, p. 291). On the spiritual dimension of music, Baraka (2009) explains, “Music is the feeling as thought as feeling raised or transformed into a less static entity. Music goes into the spirit deeper because it has physical properties that carry intellectual and spiritual correspondences not limited by its physical properties” (p. 141). In other words, music allows for spiritual communication; physical boundaries do not limit the spiritual state that music creates. For Baraka, music is a means to defy and transcend racial barriers in the physical world. Like Giovanni, in his poem “Wailers,” Baraka is a leader of rebellion who seeks to activate the spirit of his audience through the power of jazz:

Wailers are we  
We are Wailers. Don't get scared.  
Nothing happening but out and way out.  
Nothing happening but the positive. (Unless you the negative.)  
Wailers. We Wailers. Yeh, Wailers.  
We wail, we wail. (1996, p. 21)

The similarity between these verses and jazz music is too powerful as the word morphs into a musical instrument. Ellison (1994) suggests that Baraka's poetry has the same structure as jazz music; it is marked by the combination of formal and unstructured sounds, and it "is basically dialogic" (p. 117). Like jazz music, Baraka's poetry also has an "elastic improvisational form" (Ellison, 1994, p. 123). However, the musicality of his poetry does not obscure the revolutionary aspect of his art. In his poem "Wailers," a eulogy to Larry Neal and Bob Marley, Baraka's musical dimension sharpens the power of his words. In this poem, Baraka celebrates the struggle of Larry Neal and Bob Marley in defying oppression. The speaker, who, through the use of "we," assumes a collective voice, wails loudly about racism and injustice. The speaker embodies the voice of the African American community which laments a painful past. Yet, the complaint ends on a far more hopeful note than it began, "Nothing happening but the positive. (Unless you the negative.)". There will be a brighter day on the horizon. Like a preacher who promises heaven, the speaker instills a sustaining hope in his audience. The poem's message is empowered by the use of Jazz music's techniques. Baraka (1996, p. 21) uses the call and response technique to provoke an audience to think about the possibility of change, "Call Me Bud Powell. You wanna imitate this?/ Listen. Sprree dee deet sprree deee whee spredeee whee deee." The transcription of sounds establishes the impression of spontaneity and immediacy. Baraka also employs improvisation "(Unless you the negative.)" and repetition "Wailers. We Wailers. Yeh, Wailers./ We wail, we wail" which are also regarded as important marks of jazz music to accentuate the meaning of his words. In these verses, "Be We. We Wailers. Blue Blowers. The Real Rhythm Kings./We sing philosophy. Hambone precise findings. Image Masters of the syncopated." (1996, p. 21), the speaker refers to the technique of syncopation.<sup>4</sup> This reference to jazz is indicative of Baraka's unwavering devotion to jazz.

### **Islam and the Black Arts Movement**

The marriage between jazz and poetry has allowed Black Arts poets to return to Africa in a journey deemed inevitable to shun the disillusionment of the exclusionary world. This sense of belonging to Africa, which is, as mentioned above, nurtured by African American's embracing of their ancestors' religions, such as the Yoruba religion, is also nourished by Islam. Islam is also a form of spirituality that has molded Black Arts poets' work and enabled them to reclaim Africa. There is a misbelief that Black Africans are new converts to Islam. Africa has been introduced to Islam since the seventh century. As early as the eighth century, the Islamization of sub-

Saharan Africa began when North African merchants spread Islam through trade expeditions, “Islam developed in the zones that long-distance commerce opened” (Salvaing, 2020, p. 19). Black Arts artists’ return to Africa has awakened them to the power of Islam, because their “political struggle” is also a “cultural struggle,” a different form of spirituality is requested (McAlister, 1999, p. 638). On African Americans’ rejection of Christianity, Timothy (2002) argues, “the consciousness of having gods other than those possessed by the enslavers was of course tremendously mentally liberating, and served to inspire the desire for revolt” (p. 134). Islam was another form of spirituality that some BAM artists and poets embraced because it is believed to be “the natural religion of the Black Nation” (Muhammad, 1973, p.80). To McAlister (1999), the power of Islam was not strictly affecting poets and artists who were Muslims; Islam has also caressed the soul of non-Muslims within BAM (p. 641). For some members of BAM, Islam was a potent religion and a marker of African culture.

Baraka is one of the members of the BAM who honor Islam in their writing.<sup>5</sup> McAlister (1999), who focuses on his status as a playwright, regards his plays “A Black Mass” (1965), the anthology, *Black Fire* (1968), and his collection, *New Plays for the Black Theatre* (1969) as a projection of a strong fondness for the new religion. In Baraka’s interview with Marvin X and Faruk X (1994), he states that the presence of Islam in his writing owes to the atmosphere that marked Harlem from 1964-1965. In this era, Both Islam and the Yoruba religion have powerfully affected Baraka. (p. 51). Despite his support of all religions, Baraka views Islam as the most certain route to truth. He explains that Islam is similar to science in leading an individual to understand “all phenomena,” thus, he rejects Christianity since “it tends to cover truth rather than reveal it” (Marvin X & Faruk X, 1994, p.52). Baraka accentuates the connection between art and Islam, “The artist’s words, the signs, the symbols, the artifacts are magic things, they’re supposed to be able to suggest the presence of Allah (God). Just by hearing them (words), showing them, they’re supposed to place you in close contact with the Divinity” (Marvin X & Faruk X, 1994, p.55). To Baraka, the line between art and religion is completely blurred since both art and religion seek to manifest the existence of divinity. This quote emphasizes the link between Islam and creativity in Baraka’s works. It is worth mentioning that Baraka’s treatment of Islam in his writing reveals a new vision of this religion.<sup>6</sup> In Baraka’s poem “Ka ‘Ba” (1969), the last stanza powerfully shows the impact of Islam:<sup>7</sup>

We have been captured,  
 and we labor to make our getaway, into  
 the ancient image; into a new  
 Correspondence with ourselves  
 and our Black family. We need magic  
 now we need the spells, to raise up  
 return, destroy, and create. What will be  
 the sacred word? (*Genius*)



In this verse, “We need magic now we need the spells,” Baraka refers to the power of the Quran since the term ‘magic’ has often been linked to the Quran. In the Quran, the chapter of “Ahqaf”- “The Dunes,” the seventh verse, Allah says, “When Our revelations are recited to them, plain and clear, those who disbelieve say of the truth when it has come to them, ‘This is obviously magic.’”<sup>8</sup> Because they were unable to grasp the power of the Quran, disbelievers regarded the Quran as a work of magic. Allah’s words show that the Quran transcends humans’ knowledge and challenges their minds. Rassool, a professor of Islamic psychology, claims that Islam teaches Muslims that one of the ways in which they can protect themselves from “the evils of envy, jealousy and Jinn [demon] manifestation [and] black magic” is through reading the Quran. Rassool also argues that the Quran “promotes healing and spiritual cure” (Rassoul, 2019, as cited in Rassoul, 2021, p. 475). The Quran’s ability to protect humans from different sorts of evil, such as, witchcraft or evil eye, as well as its healing function, could powerfully explain the link between Quran and magic.<sup>9</sup> Through “the sacred words” of the Quran, African Americans will be able to rise against oppression; they will return as a powerful and creative race. Islam’s strong message of acceptance nourishes African Americans’ pride and self-love.<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In Hazel’s interview (2022) with the Black performance artist and activist Tricia Hersey, the importance of spirituality is emphasized; Hersey asserts, “At the heart of us as human beings, I believe that it’s our divinity to create and invent. In the seat of our creativity is spiritual practice” (para. 23). The spiritual impulse is a hallmark of the BAM, it is a force that spurs African Americans’ growth. Through the works of Black Arts literary artists, we can see how spirituality is imbued with a greater value. It is not only a cultural marker, it is an affirmation of the cultural and racial African American identity. Spirituality enables African Americans to reconnect to African sensibilities, reclaim black glory and disrupt Eurocentric definitions of Black identity. Although the BAM faded away by the mid-1970s, spirituality still occupies a central position in the African American community. Farrag (2018) notes that spirituality is inherent in the movement of Black Lives Matter; it is embodied in “the chants in front of the Los Angeles court house declaring “summon our ancestors,” and grassroots organizations’ use of spiritually infused tools to heal those directly impacted by state violence” (p. 77). These words show that spirituality and the political protest conjoin in black political and social movements.

## Notes

- 1 Black Power is a revolutionary movement founded in the 1960s and 1970s. The movement is concerned with “racial pride, economic empowerment, and the creation of political and cultural institutions. During this era, there was a rise in the demand for Black history courses, a greater embrace of African culture, and a spread of raw artistic expression displaying the realities of African Americans” (*Black Power*, 2021, para. 1).
- 2 Spirituality and religion share similarities, yet there are differences between them. While spirituality “is not connected to any particular religious tradition or institution. Instead it refers to characteristics like interest in the divine, transcendence, ultimate meaning, etc., which can be filled in very different ways . . . Religion then refers to institutionalized religion, to religious communities and hierarchies, most often with a fixed creedal and moral system in the sense of dogma”( Dowling & Scarlett, 2006, p. 121).
- 3 Hager’s story features in the first book of the bible, Genesis. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. However, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, had a childless marriage. Thus, Sarah resolved to grant him a wife to bear him a child. Sarah chose her Egyptian servant Hagar who gave birth to Ishmael. When Sarah also became pregnant and offered Abraham Isaac who would fulfill God’s promise to Abraham, tension escalated between the two women. Out of fear for Isaac’s inheritance, Sarah asked Abraham to force Hagar to leave. Hagar and her son “face death in the wilderness until God rescues them. The deity promises Hagar and her child will become a great nation” (Russell& Tribble, 2006, 3).
- 4 Syncopation in jazz music is “the placing of accents unexpectedly on the upbeat rather than the downbeat” (Robey,2023, p. 4 ). In jazz poetry, the technique becomes a literary device when the poet alters the changing of the accentual stress pattern and the number of syllables.
- 5 Amiri Baraka was born Everett LeRoi Jones and became Amiri Baraka after the assassination of Malcolm X, a prominent Muslim member of the Nation of Islam. The Nation of Islam is an Islamic and Black nationalist movement established in Michigan by Wallace D. Fard Muhammad in 1930. It is a combination between Islam and Black nationalist ideologies, the Nation of Islam achieved popularity among African Americans who were drawn to its promising message of racial equity (*Black Arts Movement (1965-1975)*, 2021, para. 1).
- 6 There are differences between the Nation of Islam’s vision of Islam and the mainstream, Sunni Islam. The idea that Fard Muhammed is the personification of the last prophet Muhammed (Gibson, 2012, p.18) is a striking difference. Sunni Islam does not believe in humans’ personification of God or the prophet.
- 7 “Kaaba” is a sacred building made of a black stone. The Ka ‘Ba is considered as the center of the Islamic world, it is situated in the courtyard of the central mosque in Mecca. For Muslims, Ka ‘Ba was established by Abraham and his son Ishmael to answer God’s order.
- 8 The translation of the Quran verses are taken from Talal Itani’s *Quran: Arabic and English in Parallel* (2005).
- 9 “We send down in the Quran healing and mercy for the believers, but it increases the wrongdoers only in loss” (Chapter Israa, verse 82).
- 10 In his last sermon the Prophet Muhammed said, “All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over white-except by piety and good action” (*The Last Sermon of Prophet Muhammad(SAW)*, n.d.).

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