

Echoes of the Ancestors: Reimagining African Oral Literature through Contemporary Literary Criticism

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Abstract : African oral literature, long marginalised within the global literary canon, carries the philosophical, aesthetic, and cultural depth of entire civilisations. This paper examines the persistent tension between orality and literacy in literary criticism, seeking to reposition African oral traditions as foundational texts worthy of critical engagement. Drawing from African-centered literary theories, performance studies, and decolonial epistemologies, the study reimagines how folktales, praise poetry, epics, and proverbs can be critically analysed without distorting their indigenous aesthetics and performative contexts. By examining selected oral texts and juxtaposing them with prevailing literary critical frameworks, the paper highlights the limitations of Eurocentric approaches in interpreting African orature. It proposes a shift towards methodologies that honour performance, community, and ancestral memory as essential components of literary meaning. Furthermore, it foregrounds the contributions of African scholars who advocate for the intellectual sovereignty of oral traditions within academic discourse. Ultimately, this research calls for a decolonised literary praxis that does not merely include oral literature as supplementary material but acknowledges it as a vital, generative force in shaping African literary thought. By amplifying the echoes of the ancestors, this paper contributes to the ongoing scholarly effort to redefine what constitutes literature in Africa and how it should be studied.

Keywords: African-Centered Theory ; African Oral Literature ; Decolonial Aesthetics. ; Literary Criticism ; Orality and Performance

Résumé: Longtemps marginalisée au sein du canon littéraire mondial, la littérature orale africaine recèle pourtant une profondeur philosophique, esthétique et culturelle propre à des civilisations entières. Cet article examine la tension persistante entre oralité et écriture dans la critique littéraire, dans le but de repositionner les traditions orales africaines comme des textes fondateurs dignes d'une analyse critique rigoureuse. S'appuyant sur des théories littéraires afrocentrées, les études de la performance et les épistémologies décoloniales, cette étude propose une relecture critique des contes, des poésies de louange, des épopées et des proverbes, sans altérer leurs esthétiques indigènes ni leurs contextes performatifs. À travers l'analyse de textes oraux sélectionnés et leur mise en dialogue avec les cadres dominants de la critique littéraire, l'article met en lumière les limites des approches eurocentriques dans l'interprétation de l'oralité africaine. Il plaide en faveur d'un déplacement méthodologique vers des approches qui reconnaissent la performance, la communauté et la mémoire ancestrale comme des composantes essentielles de la signification littéraire. En outre, l'étude met en valeur les contributions de chercheurs africains qui défendent la souveraineté intellectuelle des traditions orales au sein du discours académique. En définitive, cette recherche appelle à une praxis littéraire décolonisée qui ne se contente pas d'intégrer la littérature orale comme matériau auxiliaire, mais qui la reconnaît comme une force vitale et génératrice dans la construction de la pensée littéraire africaine. En amplifiant les échos des ancêtres, cet article s'inscrit dans l'effort scientifique continu visant à redéfinir ce qui constitue la littérature en Afrique et les modalités légitimes de son étude.

Mots-clés: Théorie afrocentrée ; Littérature orale africaine ; Esthétique décoloniale ; Critique littéraire ; Oralité et performance

Introduction

African oral literature is a vast and diverse cultural reservoir that transmits knowledge, identity, memory, and philosophy across generations. Far from being static or primitive, it is an evolving art form rooted in communal performance and intergenerational dialogue. It encompasses a wide array of genres, including folktales, epics, praise poetry, proverbs, riddles, initiation songs, and chants, each of which plays a distinctive role in the socio-cultural and spiritual life of African communities (Finnegan, 2012, p. 23; Barber, 1997, p. 2). Oral literature is not only a source of aesthetic pleasure but also a sophisticated mode of storytelling that encodes systems of ethics, cosmologies, social critique, and historical consciousness.

Despite this richness, oral literature has historically been denied full recognition within dominant literary critical traditions. For much of the 20th century, literary studies—shaped largely by Western epistemologies—privileged the written word as the primary marker of civilisation and intellectual achievement. Under such frameworks, African oral traditions were often classified as “folklore,” a term that relegated them to the margins of serious literary analysis (Ong, 1982, p. 5). Early anthropologists and colonial ethnographers treated oral texts as cultural curiosities rather than dynamic literary artifacts, stripping them of their performative context and philosophical complexity (Vansina, 1985, p. 13). These colonial legacies have left enduring traces in global academic discourse and how African institutions have internalised Western models of literary value and criticism.

The impact of this epistemic marginalisation is twofold. Firstly, it has led to the underrepresentation of oral literature in the African literary canon, where the emphasis is often placed on postcolonial novels and poetry written in European languages. Secondly, it has produced a critical vacuum in which oral forms are either misread through inappropriate theoretical lenses or excluded altogether. As Ngugi (1986, p. 15) argues, the colonial encounter severed African literature from its oral roots, alienating African people from their own intellectual traditions. The urgent task, then, is to decolonise the methodologies and frameworks through which we study African literature—to listen not only to the voices of the written word but also to the echoes of the ancestors.

In response to these challenges, a growing body of scholarship seeks to centre African epistemologies in the critical engagement with orature. Barber (2007, p. 3) has championed a cultural poetics approach that sees African oral forms as complex, context-dependent texts that demand equally nuanced analytical tools. Similarly, Nyamnjoh (2017, p. 12) critiques the “incompleteness” of Western knowledge models and calls for a literary criticism that embraces fluidity, interconnection, and the porous boundaries between oral and written traditions. These scholars argue that the criteria for what constitutes literature must be broadened to accommodate non-Western aesthetic systems—systems that value communal authorship, performance, temporality, and audience interaction as core elements of literary expression.

This paper builds upon such interventions by proposing a reimagining of African oral literature through contemporary literary criticism—one that neither subordinates orature to written forms nor attempts to analyse it using alien paradigms. This study is grounded in African-centered literary theory, decolonial epistemologies, and performance studies, articulating a culturally informed and methodologically robust framework of analysis. Rather than treating orature as peripheral to literature, it interrogates praise poems (izibongo), folktales, and epics as repositories of philosophy, ethics, and collective wisdom that destabilise the long-standing binaries between the “oral” and the “written.” The analysis foregrounds performance, rhythm, bodily gesture, and communal interaction not as ancillary features, but as constitutive aesthetic strategies that enrich meaning and sustain the vitality of oral traditions.

Equally important is the paper’s critical reflection on the processes of transcribing, translating, and institutionalising orature within the academy. It asks what dimensions are illuminated, altered, or even erased when oral performance is recast in textual form, and

calls for a multimodal hermeneutics that preserves the dynamism of the spoken word. By situating oral texts within African philosophical traditions and critical discourse, the research contributes not only to the scholarly study of orature but also to the wider intellectual project of reclaiming Africa's knowledge ecologies.

Ultimately, this work advances a vision of decolonised literary practice that refuses to reduce orature to a token presence in the canon. Instead, it seeks to redefine the very parameters of literary value by affirming that oral traditions are vibrant, contemporary texts that continue to shape African selfhood, cultural memory, and modes of resistance. To amplify these voices is therefore to engage in critique, as well as in cultural affirmation and epistemic restitution, affirming the enduring centrality of orature to Africa's intellectual and imaginative life.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on African oral literature, a persistent gap remains in contemporary literary criticism: the absence of a coherent, African-centred critical framework that treats orature not as supplementary cultural material but as a foundational literary system with its own aesthetic logic, epistemology, and modes of meaning-making. This paper addresses that gap by asking how African oral traditions can be critically analysed on their own terms—through performance, communal authorship, ancestral memory, and relational epistemologies—without being subsumed under Eurocentric textualist paradigms. In doing so, the study advances a decolonial literary praxis that redefines what counts as literature in Africa and how literary value itself is constituted.

This paper presents an original and distinctive contribution to the field of contemporary literary criticism by foregrounding African epistemologies and interpretive frameworks as central to the evaluation of literary texts. Unlike existing studies that remain heavily indebted to Euro-American critical paradigms, this work reorients the discourse towards indigenous African intellectual resources, demonstrating how oral traditions, cultural memory, and decolonial hermeneutics can generate fresh critical insights. Its contribution lies not only in challenging the epistemic dominance of Western literary theories but also in constructing a dialogic space where African oral aesthetics and philosophical perspectives inform, extend, and even contest mainstream critical approaches. By integrating both canonical and less-explored African texts into its analysis, the paper expands the boundaries of literary criticism, positioning African literature as a source of theoretical innovation rather than a mere object of study. In doing so, the research makes a substantive contribution to the ongoing project of decolonising knowledge, while simultaneously offering future scholars a methodological template for critical practice that is both globally relevant and firmly rooted in Africa's intellectual traditions.

Literature Review

The scholarly engagement with African oral literature has been marked by a long and often contentious trajectory, entangled with colonial legacies, disciplinary divisions, and the enduring privileging of writing as the dominant medium of cultural expression. Foundational studies, such as those by Ruth Finnegan (2012), provided invaluable documentation of Africa's diverse oral forms, creating a corpus that continues to inform the field. Yet, her work—framed within Eurocentric epistemological assumptions—tended to abstract oral traditions from the vibrant performance contexts in which they acquire meaning. Finnegan's emphasis on classification and typological analysis, while path-breaking, inadvertently encouraged the textualisation of orature, reducing living traditions to static artefacts or what might be called "literary fossils" (Finnegan 2012, pp. 32–33), thereby diminishing the performative aesthetics and cultural vitality that animate them in situ.

The limitations of this paradigm provoked strong intellectual responses from postcolonial African thinkers who insisted on reclaiming indigenous epistemologies and restoring the dignity of oral traditions. Foremost among them, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986, p.13) advanced the concept of orature as a counter-hegemonic intervention, asserting that oral forms embody aesthetic innovation, ideological strength, and cultural resilience. For

Ngũgĩ, orature functions not merely as a vestige of the past but as a living archive of communal memory and a potent space of resistance against domination. Chinua Achebe (1975, p. 45) similarly emphasised the importance of evaluating African literature with interpretive tools rooted in its own cultural and historical context. Achebe warned against the uncritical imposition of Western critical frameworks on African texts, particularly oral traditions whose logic of narration, participatory ethos, and moral imperatives operate within fundamentally different aesthetic and philosophical registers.

This intellectual reorientation opened the way for subsequent scholars such as Isidore Okpewho, Karin Barber, and Ruth Amossy, who placed performance at the heart of interpretation. Their interventions dismantled the reductive textualist bias by highlighting gesture, rhythm, improvisation, and audience interaction as constitutive elements of meaning. In doing so, they not only revitalised the study of orature but also repositioned it as a dynamic field capable of theorising its own aesthetics and contributing to the global landscape of literary criticism. Okpewho (1992, p. 21) highlighted the integral role of the performer, not merely as a reciter but as a creative agent whose delivery shapes the text's meaning. He emphasised that the oral artist improvises, adapts, and engages the audience in real-time, making every performance a unique act of literary creation. Barber (2007, p. 33) further developed this idea by introducing the concept of the "text-event," where the boundary between text and context collapses, and the social, political, and emotional environment becomes part of the narrative. Such approaches have shifted the discourse from textual fixation to a more holistic understanding of orature as embodied literature.

Despite this growing recognition of performance, many literary curricula and critical frameworks remain text-bound. African oral literature is still too often read through lenses developed for written, individual-authored works—an approach that marginalises orature's communal authorship, fluidity, and interactivity. As Nfah-Abbenyi (1997, p. 28) observes, feminist and poststructuralist theories, when uncritically imported, can obscure the culturally specific dynamics of power, voice, and agency in oral texts. She calls for a more nuanced critical framework attentive to gender and grounded in African epistemological traditions. Similarly, Mazrui (2004, p. 16) critiques the persistence of Western theoretical paradigms in African literary studies, arguing that they often impose ill-fitting models that ignore the unique ontological and epistemological dimensions of African narratives.

The need for African-centred theoretical models is increasingly voiced in contemporary scholarship. Scholars, including Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike (1980) as well as Ngara (1990), have long insisted that African literary criticism must be rooted in the cultural matrices, histories, and languages of African communities. In their seminal intervention, Chinweizu et al. (1980, 239) famously demanded the decolonisation of African literature, contending that criticism ought to embody African aesthetic sensibilities, value systems, and ideological orientations. They underscore the centrality of oral traditions—anchored in communal life and cultural memory—as fertile repositories of indigenous philosophies that must be interrogated from within their own epistemic frameworks. Echoing this perspective, Ngara (1990, p. 40) maintains that the stylistic and ideological choices observable in African oral and written literatures derive primarily from collective consciousness and communal worldviews, in contrast to the Western literary tradition's privileging of individualism and subjectivity.

A parallel development in the field is the increasing engagement with decolonial and relational epistemologies as interpretive lenses for African orature. Francis B. Nyamnjoh (2017, p. 18) advances the notions of "incompleteness" and "convivial scholarship" as critical to understanding African oral traditions, stressing that such narratives resist closure or singularity, instead valuing multiplicity, ambiguity, and metaphysical resonance. This perspective resonates with broader African philosophies such as Ubuntu, which foreground interdependence, relationality, and oral transmission over the rigidities of textual permanence. Similarly, decolonial theorists such as Walter D. Mignolo (2011) and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) advocate for what they term epistemic disobedience: an intellectual

and methodological disconnection from Eurocentric epistemologies. Their appeal is for African scholars to reclaim and re-centre indigenous modes of storytelling and knowledge-making in both academic scholarship and public intellectual discourse.

Despite these advances, oral literature remains controlled by many literary departments and critical texts. Newell (2006, p. 7) laments that many scholars treat orature as background material for novels or raw data for linguistic analysis, rather than recognising it as a full-fledged literary tradition. This instrumentalisation of orature limits its interpretive potential and reinforces the hierarchies of knowledge that African literary scholars have long sought to dismantle. Furthermore, with the increasing digitisation of oral performances—through social media, YouTube storytelling channels, and digital archives—there is a need for updated critical models to address the evolving nature of orality in the digital age (Harrow, 2013, p. 114).

In light of these discussions, this study positions itself at the intersection of orature, performance, and decolonial literary criticism. It seeks to foreground African oral texts as sophisticated literary artifacts whose analysis requires equally sophisticated, culturally grounded critical tools. By doing so, it aims to move beyond tokenistic inclusion and toward a genuinely decolonised literary praxis that honours the complexity, artistry, and continuing relevance of African oral traditions.

Theoretical Framework

Building on the scholarly interventions reviewed above, this theoretical framework does not restate existing debates but operationalises African-centred criticism, performance theory, and decolonial epistemologies as analytical tools for reading oral literature as literature.

This study is anchored in a composite theoretical orientation that draws on African-centred literary criticism, performance theory, decolonial epistemologies, and relational ontologies. Together, these perspectives provide a critically nuanced and culturally situated framework for interpreting African oral literature. The convergence of these intellectual traditions not only foregrounds the distinctiveness of orature but also systematically destabilises the hegemony of Eurocentric paradigms that continue to dominate global literary studies.

At the foundation of this inquiry lies the African-centred literary tradition, which insists on African worldviews, languages, and cultural philosophies as legitimate epistemic grounds for critical engagement. The intervention of Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike (1980) remains instructive in this regard. They call for a decisive break from Euro-American models of interpretation that have historically marginalised or distorted African expressive cultures. In their analysis, African literature must be measured against the socio-historical conditions and aesthetic sensibilities that inform its production (Chinweizu et al., 1980, p. 240). This insistence is particularly salient for oral traditions, which thrive on collective authorship, cyclical temporality, and symbolic layering rather than the linearity and textual fixity privileged by Western criticism. Similarly, Ngara (1990, p. 40) reinforces the point that African texts must be approached with critical tools that reflect the ideological, cultural, and historical realities from which they emerge—tools that are themselves as flexible and plural as the oral forms they seek to analyse.

Given that orature is intrinsically performative, performance theory constitutes an indispensable dimension of this framework. Richard Bauman (1986, p. 4) conceptualises performance not simply as the recitation of texts, but as a dynamic communicative act where meaning is generated in relation to audience interaction, expressive style, and socio-cultural context. In this light, oral literature is not a static artifact but a living event in which significance is co-created through the embodied presence of the performer and the participatory involvement of the audience. Isidore Okpewho (1992, p. 18) expands on this, describing the oral artist as both custodian and innovator who reanimates tradition through modulation of voice, rhythm, gesture, and improvisation. By applying performance theory,

oral texts can be appreciated in their full aesthetic and cultural vitality, transcending the reductive textualisation to which earlier scholarship confined them.

Yet, performance-centred approaches, valuable as they are, cannot stand alone without confronting the broader epistemic structures that have historically devalued orature. Here, decolonial theory provides crucial insight. Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986, p. 16) has shown that the marginalisation of orality is not incidental but deeply entangled with the colonial politics of language and knowledge production. The privileging of writing within colonial and postcolonial educational systems represents a larger project of epistemic domination, one in which African modes of knowing were systematically delegitimised. Walter Mignolo (2011) identifies this as the “coloniality of knowledge,” where Western paradigms assert their universality while suppressing other epistemologies. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018, p. 39) extends this critique by calling for epistemic freedom—the capacity of African scholars to reclaim and articulate their own modes of thought and representation. Within this discourse, orature is repositioned not as a pre-literate precursor destined for obsolescence but as a coherent and vibrant epistemological system with its own aesthetic logic and cultural authority.

To these decolonial insights, Francis B. Nyamnjoh (2017) adds a vital philosophical and relational dimension. His notion of “incompleteness as a virtue” reorients analysis away from the Western pursuit of closure and finality toward African systems of thought that celebrate fluidity, ambiguity, and multiplicity. Oral narratives, with their dialogic structures, multiple endings, and openness to reinterpretation, exemplify this worldview. For Nyamnjoh, storytelling is less about definitive meaning than about sustaining relationships—between the teller and the listener, the human and the cosmos, the past and the present. Such a relational orientation resonates deeply with the performative nature of orature and provides a powerful counterpoint to Western critical traditions that valorise textual permanence and interpretive control.

Taken together, these intersecting theories provide a robust and culturally attuned framework for the study of African oral literature. They resist the erasure of orature from the domain of serious literary discourse and equip scholars with conceptual tools to engage its complexity, performativity, and philosophical depth. More importantly, they contribute to the ongoing construction of a decolonised and African-centred literary praxis—one that recognises the artistry, wisdom, and resilience of the spoken word as central to Africa’s intellectual heritage and contemporary identity.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology, firmly situated within African-centred and decolonial paradigms, to interrogate selected forms of African oral literature. Rather than treating oral texts as static artefacts, the study emphasises their cultural, performative, and philosophical significance within the communities that produce and sustain them. By engaging with narratives such as folktales and praise poetry, the analysis aims to reveal how oral performance serves as a multifaceted practice, a repository of communal memory, and a vehicle for transmitting indigenous knowledge systems. In doing so, the methodology affirms the standing of oral literature as a legitimate literary tradition in its own right, moving beyond its long-standing relegation to the domains of ethnography or folklore studies.

The primary corpus comprises transcribed oral performances drawn from published anthologies, supplemented by audiovisual recordings of oral artists, particularly in isiXhosa and related indigenous languages. These materials are analysed through close reading and performance-sensitive criticism, guided by theoretical tools from African-centred literary criticism, performance studies, and decolonial thought. Special attention is paid to features such as repetition, call-and-response structures, symbolism, tonal variation, rhythm, gesture, and the dialogic relationship between performer and audience—all of which are integral to the meaning-making processes of oral literature. The analytical strategy is thus

designed to preserve the vitality of performance while elucidating the deeper philosophical and literary dimensions encoded in these traditions.

This methodological orientation is deliberately open-ended and flexible, reflecting Francis Nyamnjoh's (2017) principle of "incompleteness as a virtue." Meaning in oral traditions is rarely fixed or final; it emerges through negotiation, improvisation, and a relational approach. To capture this, the study avoids prescriptive or universalising frameworks and instead cultivates a hermeneutic openness that allows the texts to "speak" in ways consistent with their cultural logic. At the same time, the approach remains rigorous, embedding the close reading of texts within the socio-political and historical conditions that shape their performance, circulation, and reception.

Ultimately, this methodology advances the broader aim of the study: to contribute to a decolonised literary praxis. By foregrounding the richness, resilience, and sophistication of African oral traditions, the research resists their marginalisation in global literary discourse and reaffirms their role as living archives of African thought, creativity, and identity.

The oral traditions analysed in this study, drawn from Southern, West, and Sahelian Africa—were selected deliberately rather than exhaustively. These cases represent diverse genres (praise poetry, folktales, epics, ritual performance) and regions, allowing the study to illustrate how shared aesthetic principles—performance, communal authorship, and ancestral memory—manifest differently across cultural contexts. The aim is not comprehensive coverage, but to demonstrate the continent-wide literary coherence of African orature through representative examples.

Analysis and Discussion

African oral literature constitutes a profound intellectual and artistic tradition, functioning not only as a mode of creative expression but also as a socio-political instrument across the continent. Its depth resides not merely in narrative content but in the performative, spiritual, and epistemological frameworks that give it life and continuity. This study draws on a range of case studies from diverse African communities, each illustrating the unique aesthetic strategies and cultural logics that distinguish orature from other literary forms. Interpreted through African-centred criticism, performance theory, and decolonial perspectives, these oral traditions are shown to embody complex literary, ethical, and philosophical systems. In doing so, they resist the reductive textualism of dominant paradigms and affirm oral literature as a sophisticated and dynamic archive of African thought.

Among the most acclaimed oral forms in Southern Africa is *izibongo*, also known as Xhosa praise poetry. These compositions are historically performed by *iimbongi* (praise poets) as artistic expressions and instruments of social critique. The praise poet plays a crucial socio-political role, offering nuanced commentary on the character, lineage, and leadership of individuals, often within public ceremonial settings. Cope's (1968, pp. 16–18) analysis of the *izibongo* of Shaka Zulu illustrates how the poetry blends historical narrative, metaphorical language, and militaristic imagery to construct a heroic but morally complex image of the Zulu king. These poems employ alliteration, repetition, and ideophones alongside controlled bodily movement and vocal tone, all of which are integral to meaning-making. As Okpewho (1992, p. 83) argues, the *iimbongi*'s performance is not supplementary to the text—it is the text. Audience reactions, call-and-response exchanges, and even the physical arrangement of the gathering contribute to the co-creation of the literary moment.

The performative element is similarly central in West African storytelling traditions, particularly in Yoruba folktales known as *alo*. Typically narrated in the evening under the moonlight, *it also* involves an intergenerational, participatory setting in which elders share stories that transmit moral values, societal norms, and collective memory. A common figure in these tales is *Ijapa* the tortoise, whose cleverness and duplicity frequently serve both humorous and didactic purposes. As Abrahams (1983, p. 92) observes, these tales allow storytellers to explore themes such as greed, wisdom, justice, and community obligations through layered symbolism. The trickster trope is a culturally nuanced device that celebrates

survival strategies while warning against excess and ego. The narrative is kept alive through vivid vocal inflections, mimetic gestures, strategic pauses, and even dramatic enactment of character roles. Children and other listeners are not passive recipients but are drawn into the performance, often prompted to chant, predict outcomes, or complete rhythmic lines. This kind of engagement exemplifies Bauman's (1986, p. 4) assertion that storytelling is an event rather than a product, where performer, audience, and space converge in a shared literary moment.

From a literary-critical perspective, meaning in *alo* emerges not from plot alone but from patterned repetition, metaphorical compression, and performative timing. The tortoise's cunning is amplified through vocal modulation, strategic pauses, and audience anticipation, transforming narrative into ethical commentary. These devices function as aesthetic strategies comparable to irony and symbolism in written literature, reinforcing the claim that orature generates literary meaning through performance rather than inscription.

Another profound tradition is the *jeliw* or griot epic tradition of the Mande people in Mali, Senegal, and Guinea. These oral historians preserve genealogies, historical events, and myths through musical performances and praise narratives, most famously the *Sunjata* epic. This epic recounts the rise of Sundiata Keita and the founding of the Mali Empire. However, as Johnson (1992, p. 45) illustrates, each performance of *Sunjata* is distinct, with griots adjusting tone, emphasis, and content to suit the political and cultural moment. They also integrate regional variations, mythic elements, and religious symbolism into the narrative, creating an adaptable and living text. Music, particularly the *kora* and *balafon*, is not a mere backdrop but a co-narrator that adds emotional texture and rhythmic coherence. Barber (2007, p. 56) describes this as a "text-event" in which the oral artist, the musical instruments, and the social context collectively constitute the text. Here, literature transcends the written and exists as embodied memory and living performance—a feature that destabilises conventional literary assumptions about fixity and authorship.

Moving northward, Berber and Tuareg oral poetry in the Sahara region serves as an archive of cultural resilience. For example, the *tisiway* and *tahagayt* traditions of Tuareg women are lyric forms recited during festivals and private gatherings. These poems often express longing, critique social injustice, and comment on gendered power structures (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 19). Recitation is personal and communal, creating a space for emotion, defiance, and solidarity. Unlike Western lyric poetry, which is typically read in solitude, Tuareg poetry is inherently relational, intended to resonate in the shared space between performer and community. This relationality affirms Nyamnjoh's (2017, p. 10) "incompleteness" theory, where meaning is negotiated, provisional, and co-produced through ongoing interaction.

Additionally, the *bira* ceremonies among the Shona of Zimbabwe reflect another dimension of orature—its fusion with ritual and spirit communication. In these ceremonies, mediums become vessels for ancestral spirits, delivering messages that combine historical knowledge with present-day socio-political critique. Lan (1985, p. 120) shows how musical rhythms, chants, and symbolic language within the *bira* offer moral guidance and affirm cultural continuity. These are not merely spiritual acts but deeply narrative events that contain metaphoric, aesthetic, and ethical complexity. Western literary criticism often lacks the language to engage these forms, treating them as religious rites rather than as literary performances. However, from an African-centred perspective, these are texts—spiritual, aesthetic, and philosophical—worthy of rigorous critical engagement.

Across these examples, a common thread emerges: African oral literature is not merely a cultural practice, but a fully formed literary tradition with its own systems of coherence, authority, and innovation. Its reliance on performance, audience interaction, and communal authorship radically challenges the dominant Western literary model that privileges individual authorship, print textuality, and literary closure. Chinweizu et al. (1980, p. 243) insist that any criticism of African literature that fails to address the cultural specificities of orature reproduces colonial epistemic violence. Likewise, Mignolo's (2011,

p. 275) concept of “epistemic disobedience” reminds us that theorising African oral literature on African terms is both an intellectual and political act of resistance and reclamation.

These oral forms—whether in praise poetry, epic narrative, folktale, or ritual performance—demand critical methodologies sensitive to their epistemic foundations, aesthetic principles, and socio-political functions. They remind us that the printed page does not confine African literature, but rather it lives in breath, memory, rhythm, and community. To truly engage with it, literary criticism must listen with the analytical mind and the ear attuned to performance, culture, and ancestral presence.

Reimagining African Oral Literature in Literary Criticism

The marginalisation of African oral literature in mainstream literary criticism is a matter of academic oversight and a consequence of deeply entrenched epistemological hierarchies. Reimagining orature as central, rather than peripheral, to African literary studies necessitates a conscious recalibration of literary canons, pedagogical frameworks, and critical methodologies. A key proposal in this regard is the formal integration of orature into the literary canon, not as background material or pre-literate residue, but as a distinct and autonomous literary system that demands its own critical protocols.

Such integration begins with recognition—acknowledging the structural and aesthetic complexity of oral forms, their philosophical depth, and their continued relevance. African oral texts, as exemplified by izibongo, alo, griot epics, and ritual performances, embody all the hallmarks of literary excellence: metaphor, symbolism, irony, narrative complexity, and emotional resonance. However, their omission from literary syllabi and research agendas reflects what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018, p. 7) identifies as the “epistemic injustice” of privileging written over spoken word and Eurocentric over indigenous modes of expression. Reimagining the canon would involve systematically including transcribed and performed oral texts in university curricula, developing critical anthologies of orature, and treating oral artists—praise poets, storytellers, griots, and ritual performers—as literary figures in their own right.

The contributions of African scholars and critics have laid the intellectual foundation for this transformation. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986, p. 14) was among the first to explicitly call for the reconceptualisation of orature not as folklore but as literature proper, coining the term to place oral forms on equal footing with written texts. Similarly, Chinweizu et al. (1980, p. 239) advocated for the decolonisation of literary studies by embracing African aesthetic principles and rejecting imported standards that fail to address African realities. Scholars such as Ruth Finnegan (2012), Isidore Okpewho (1992), Karin Barber (2007), and Veronique Tadjo (2008) have also made significant contributions to the analysis, transcription, and theorisation of oral traditions across diverse regions. More recently, thinkers such as Nyamnjoh (2017), Nfah-Abbenyi (1997), and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) have challenged scholars to engage more rigorously with African epistemologies, rejecting the universalisation of Western theories as the default framework for literary analysis.

Beyond the academy, oral literature is essential in contemporary African life, particularly in education, cultural activism, and storytelling as a form of resistance. Folktales transmit ethics, language, and historical consciousness in schools and informal community settings. Radio storytelling programmes, theatre-for-development performances, and social media platforms have revitalised oral traditions for new generations in many parts of Africa. For example, digital griots in Senegal or Instagram storytellers in Kenya are using technology to adapt traditional narratives for modern relevance, addressing topics such as gender inequality, migration, and corruption. These emerging practices demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of orature in navigating modernity and challenging socio-political injustice. As Barber (2007, p. 59) observes, oral texts “continue to be reconfigured for new publics and political moments,” affirming their role as literary and civic tools.

Therefore, reimagining African oral literature must be embedded within a larger project of decolonising literary criticism. This involves more than including African texts in syllabi—it

requires rethinking the foundational assumptions of what literature is, how it functions, and who gets to define it. Mignolo (2011, p. 274) refers to this as “epistemic disobedience”—a refusal to be disciplined by Western categories of knowledge that have historically marginalised non-Western forms. Decolonial literary criticism must be dialogical rather than prescriptive, allowing African concepts such as Ubuntu, *palaver*, ancestral consciousness, and communal authorship to shape interpretive strategies.

To move forward, scholars, educators, and institutions must develop pedagogies of inclusion and methods of interpretation that reflect the linguistic, cultural, and performative realities of African societies. This includes investing in oral archives, supporting oral artists as intellectuals, and training students to listen, not only with their ears but with cultural sensitivity and historical awareness. In this light, literary criticism becomes a scholarly exercise and a political and ethical commitment to honouring the voices, rhythms, and wisdom of African ancestors and communities.

In reimaging African oral literature through this lens, the aim is not to assimilate orature into existing paradigms but to allow it to reshape the very grammar of literary thought. Only then can we move toward a truly African and global literary criticism that is inclusive, dynamic, and decolonised.

Recommendations and Implications

The implications of this study are primarily literary and pedagogical. To reposition African oral literature at the centre of literary studies, universities must integrate orature structurally into curricula, research agendas, and critical training, treating oral texts as primary literary materials rather than illustrative supplements.

Pedagogical Reforms

Teaching methodologies must be reconfigured to recognise the performative nature of orature. Classrooms should engage students through multimodal experiences—such as storytelling circles, live performances, and digital recordings—while also drawing on the authority of indigenous knowledge holders, including praise poets and griots. Such approaches will foster appreciation of the full sensory, communal, and spiritual dimensions of oral traditions.

Developing Indigenous Critical Frameworks

African literary criticism must continue to evolve its own conceptual resources rooted in African cultural and philosophical traditions. Frameworks such as Ubuntu, ancestral memory, and communal authorship offer critical lenses that resist the imposition of external theories. Interdisciplinary collaboration with linguistics, history, and philosophy is essential to building these indigenous theories into durable tools of analysis.

Digitisation and Archiving

To safeguard and extend the life of oral traditions, institutions must prioritise digitisation projects that record, translate, and annotate performances. Creating publicly accessible archives will ensure that these works remain available for both academic scholarship and community use, while preserving their vitality for future generations.

Rethinking Research and Evaluation

Methods of research and assessment must move beyond rigid textualist analysis to accommodate the performative fluidity of oral texts. This requires openness to ethnographic fieldwork, reflexive analysis, performance review, and collaborative interpretation with oral artists themselves, who should be recognised as co-producers of knowledge.

Policy and Institutional Support

Educational policymakers must embed orature structurally within curricula, from primary to postgraduate levels. Investment in funding, publishing, and professional posts dedicated to orature will give it the institutional recognition it deserves. Central to this effort is the

promotion of African languages as media of instruction and analysis, without which oral traditions risk continued marginalisation.

By enacting these recommendations, African literary studies will expand its scope and return to its roots, producing a field that is more representative of the continent's cultural wealth and intellectual traditions. Such a transformation will not only correct epistemic injustices but also enrich global literary studies by offering alternative ways of knowing, narrating, and imagining. African orature is not a relic but a living archive, one that continues to shape identities, inspire resistance, and provide philosophical insight. To affirm its rightful place in the academy is to honour Africa's past, empower its present, and secure its literary future.

Conclusion

This study has undertaken a critical re-engagement with African oral literature, foregrounding its intellectual, aesthetic, and epistemological depth as a legitimate and autonomous literary tradition. By examining forms such as praise poetry, folktales, griot epics, and ritual performances, the research demonstrates that orature is not a mere vestige of pre-literate society but a living and sophisticated system of knowledge production. Through African-centred criticism, performance theory, decolonial thought, and relational ontologies, this work affirms that oral traditions embody ancestral wisdom, moral vision, collective memory, and aesthetic ingenuity—qualities that position them as central rather than peripheral to Africa's literary and cultural heritage.

The analysis has revealed how these traditions subvert the rigid textualist assumptions of Eurocentric criticism. Case studies of isiXhosa izibongo, Yoruba *alo*, Mande griot narratives, and Shona ritual performances illustrate how meaning in orature emerges through performance, community interaction, and spiritual resonance. Such practices expose the epistemic injustice inherent in the long-standing marginalisation of oral traditions, which has resulted not from a lack of literary value but from systemic privileging of Western paradigms. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinweizu, Nyamnjoh, and Ndlovu-Gatsheni remind us, reclaiming orature is not only a scholarly imperative but also a political and ethical act of decolonisation.

To reimagine African oral literature within the discipline of literary criticism requires dismantling inherited hierarchies and reconstituting the canon on terms that are faithful to African voices and worldviews. This entails methodological renewal, pedagogical innovation, and institutional reform, so that orature is no longer treated as supplementary but as constitutive of African literary studies. By doing so, we not only pay homage to the voices of the ancestors but also affirm the living creativity of contemporary African communities and contribute to shaping a more inclusive and equitable literary future.

Author contributions

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