Tongues of Pleasure: Language Use During Sexual Acts in African Oral Traditions

ENONGENE MIRABEAU SONE

Abstract: This article investigates the expressive strategies employed in the depiction and performance of sexual intimacy within African oral literature. Situating the study within the discipline of folklore and oral traditions, it explores how indigenous African communities have historically used oral forms, such as folktales, praise poetry, initiation chants, proverbs, wedding songs, and riddles, to encode, articulate, and ritualize sexual experience. These narratives and performances often utilize metaphor, euphemism, repetition, tonal play, and symbolic imagery to convey erotic themes in ways that are both culturally sanctioned and aesthetically rich. Rather than isolating sexuality as a taboo or marginal theme, the study argues that erotic language constitutes a vital strand in the tapestry of African orature, where it functions pedagogically, performatively, and symbolically. It transmits communal values regarding desire, courtship, fertility, gender roles, and the sanctity of union. Drawing on examples from various African cultures and grounded in folklore theory, ethnopoetics, and indigenous hermeneutics, this study positions sexual discourse as an integral mode of cultural storytelling. It further shows how oral traditions use pleasure as both a narrative technique and a folkloric device, imbuing the erotic with ritual meaning, moral weight, and communal legitimacy. Ultimately, the article affirms that African oral literature offers a sophisticated lexicon for the sensual, one that deepens our understanding of the human experience as told through the enduring voice of tradition.
Keywords: erotic language, folklore, sexuality, cultural symbolism, performance, orature, Indigenous knowledge

Introduction

Sexuality, far from being a marginal or taboo subject in African oral traditions, has long been woven into the very fabric of communal storytelling, ritual, and artistic expression. Across many African cultures, sexuality is not treated as a private or repressed matter but is engaged openly through symbolic language, metaphor, performance, and ritual. Oral literature—comprising praise poetry, folktales, initiation chants, proverbs, songs, and riddles—has historically provided a culturally sanctioned space for expressing and exploring eroticism, desire, and the human body. These expressions often occur within specific socio-cultural contexts, such as initiation rites, marriage ceremonies, fertility rituals, and youth courtship gatherings, where sexual knowledge is transmitted intergenerationally through coded but artistically rich language.[1]

Enongene Mirabeau Sone is Professor of African Literature and Folklore Studies at Walter Sisulu University, South Africa. His research interests include: African oral literature and folklore studies, African aesthetics, literary theory, postcolonial African literature, literary entomology, literature and traditional medicine in Africa, and eco-culture.

ISSN: 2152-2448

In particular, the language used during or around sexual acts in African oral traditions reveals a deep engagement with the erotic as a site of cultural instruction and identity formation. Sexual discourse is often mediated through euphemism, metaphor, repetition, rhythm, tonal play, and other verbal art forms, thereby reflecting a sophisticated aesthetic that aligns pleasure with pedagogy, sensuality with spirituality, and intimacy with communal values.[2] In such contexts, erotic language is not gratuitous; it is a potent communicative strategy that encodes meanings about gender roles, power dynamics, fertility, marriage expectations, and the sanctity of union. As Tedlock notes in his work on ethnopoetics, oral traditions often "speak the unspeakable" in artistically subtle and culturally profound ways.[3]

However, despite its importance, sexual expression in African oral literature has been frequently overlooked or marginalized in scholarly discourse. Colonial moralism, missionary influence, and postcolonial academic conservatism have contributed to a sanitization of African oral texts, often suppressing or omitting the erotic dimensions of performance and narrative.[4] These interventions imposed external values that redefined indigenous forms of sexuality as shameful or primitive, thereby distorting their cultural significance. Furthermore, early ethnographers and collectors of African folklore, many of whom were outsiders or products of Victorian-era prudery, frequently filtered or censored erotic content in their translations and commentaries, creating gaps in the archive of African oral expression.[5]

This scholarly neglect has had far-reaching implications. It not only erases a significant aspect of African aesthetic and philosophical thought but also hinders contemporary attempts to understand how communities have historically navigated and negotiated the complexities of sexual identity, bodily autonomy, and erotic pleasure through oral performance. As Bakare-Yusuf argues, "to deny African expressive culture its eroticism is to deny it its fullness as a human art form.[6]

This article therefore aims to fill this gap by critically examining the role and function of sexual language within traditional African oral performances. It focuses specifically on how language is used in the context of or about sexual acts—not merely as representation but as performance, ritual, and cultural instruction. It interrogates the ways in which communities deploy linguistic artistry to communicate pleasure, desire, instruction, control, and spirituality. Drawing on examples from diverse African oral traditions—including Xhosa initiation songs, Yoruba praise poetry, Shona folktales, and Wolof love chants—this study will highlight how erotic utterance operates as a sophisticated form of oral literature with embedded cultural codes.

Framed within the disciplinary lens of oral literature and folklore studies, this article employs theoretical insights from performance theory, ethnopoetics, and African feminist hermeneutics, to analyse the textual, performative, and symbolic dimensions of sexual language.[7] It argues that the erotic in African oral traditions is a legitimate literary and cultural category, worthy of serious scholarly attention, not because it is provocative, but because it is revelatory. The study affirms that language used during or in relation to sexual acts is integral to understanding African oral literature's treatment of embodiment, morality, gendered speech, and the aesthetics of intimacy.

In foregrounding this topic, the paper seeks to not only recover marginalized voices and expressions but also challenge normative conceptions of what constitutes "literature" and

"legitimacy" within African expressive culture. It contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to decolonize African literary studies by restoring to the oral archive those themes and textures that reflect the full spectrum of human experience—including pleasure, intimacy, and the verbal performance of desire.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

To investigate the symbolic and performative dimensions of sexual language in African oral traditions, this study draws on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates performance theory, ethnopoetics, African feminist hermeneutics, and folklore studies. These frameworks collectively provide the conceptual tools for analysing how erotic language is artistically deployed, culturally encoded, and socially interpreted within oral literature.

Performance Theory

Central to this study is understanding oral literature as text and as performance—an event in a specific social and cultural context. Drawing on Bauman's theory of verbal art as performance, the paper views erotic utterance as a strategic and situated speech act communicating meaning and identity, social norms, and power relations.[8] In African settings, sexual language is often performed in ceremonies (e.g. initiation, marriage), where the audience's interpretive participation is vital to the construction of meaning. Bauman's emphasis on performance as a culturally bound, communicative act allows for an analysis of how the dynamics of occasion, genre, and social expectation shape sexual discourse during oral events. Moreover, performance theory draws attention to the embodied nature of orature—how the body becomes both the site and subject of oral expression. This is particularly important in contexts where erotic speech involves gesture, tone, repetition, mimicry, and audience interaction—all of which are central to the enactment of sexual themes in oral traditions.[9]

Ethnopoetics and the Aesthetics of Erotic Language

The study also employs the principles of ethnopoetics to examine the literary form of erotic expression in oral traditions. As Tedlock articulated, ethnopoetics focuses on the poetic structures, rhythms, tonal variations, and symbolic devices within oral performance.[10] In the context of sexual language, this approach enables a close reading of euphemism, metaphor, idiomatic speech, and the use of repetition or call-and-response to build erotic tension or playfulness in performance. Erotic language in African oral traditions is rarely explicit in a crude sense; rather, it is often encoded in culturally resonant symbols—the drum, the banana, the river, the night—each capable of multiple layered interpretations.[11] Ethnopoetics helps unpack these layers, illuminating how such language operates aesthetically and how listeners are trained to decipher and appreciate these meanings.

African Feminist Hermeneutics

In approaching gendered expressions of eroticism, this study draws on African feminist hermeneutics, particularly the work of scholars like Obioma Nnaemeka and Bibi Bakare-Yusuf. These frameworks reject Eurocentric binaries of modesty vs. vulgarity or empowerment vs. submission, instead privileging context-sensitive interpretations of how African women and men express desire, negotiate intimacy, and assert agency within oral traditions.[12] African feminist hermeneutics also interrogates how patriarchal norms shape sexual discourse, yet at the same time, provide space for subversion, resistance, and pleasure, particularly in women's oral genres such as wedding chants, laments, or fertility songs. Through this lens, sexual language is read not just for what it says about the erotic, but for how it reflects broader gendered power structures and moments of negotiation or defiance within them.

Symbolism in Folklore Studies

The article is further informed by folklore theory, especially in its emphasis on symbolism and cultural semiotics. Folklorists such as Isidore Okpewho and Kwesi Yankah have illustrated how African oral texts are embedded with symbolic systems that communicate moral, cosmological, and social values.[13] In the realm of sexual expression, symbols—whether bodily, natural, or ritual—are key to understanding how eroticism is framed and rendered meaningful. Sex in folklore is rarely represented literally; it is refracted through a system of signs that evoke the sacred, the fertile, the dangerous, or the desirable. A proverb may allude to sexual readiness; a tale may caution against unchecked lust; a song may celebrate sexual unity as harmony with ancestral law. Symbolism allows eroticism to carry both pedagogical and poetic weight. Together, these theoretical lenses allow for a multidimensional analysis of sexual language in African oral traditions, as art, performance, gendered discourse, and symbolic action. They enable the study to move beyond reductive understandings of eroticism as vulgar or peripheral. Instead, they position it as a central, dynamic, and culturally rich component of African oral literature.

Literature Review

The study of erotic language in African oral traditions lies at the intersection of several scholarly fields, including oral literature, folklore, sexuality studies, and African cultural hermeneutics. While African oral traditions have been the subject of extensive documentation and analysis, the sexual dimensions of these traditions have often been neglected, marginalized, or censored due to colonial, missionary, and even postcolonial academic discomfort with the explicit or symbolic treatment of sexuality.[14] This literature review traces key debates, identifies notable gaps, and establishes the groundwork for a focused exploration of erotic language in oral performance.

Foundational Studies in African Oral Literature

Early foundational works such as those by Ruth Finnegan and Isidore Okpewho laid the groundwork for the study of African oral literature, highlighting its diversity, performance

contexts, and thematic richness.[15] However, both scholars, though methodologically rigorous, gave limited attention to themes of sexuality. In *Oral Literature in Africa*, Finnegan acknowledges the presence of erotic symbolism in certain folktales and initiation songs but notes the frequent tendency among collectors and translators to sanitise or exclude such content due to perceived indecency or irrelevance.[16] Okpewho similarly offers an extensive analysis of heroism, morality, and cosmology but does not engage directly with erotic discourse or sexual performance as literary subjects.[17] This lacuna is partly a reflection of the time in which these works were produced, as well as the influence of colonial moralism, which cast African expressions of sexuality as either licentious or inappropriate for scholarly inquiry.[18] The reluctance to address erotic elements in oral texts has resulted in an incomplete understanding of the thematic scope and symbolic depth of African orature.

Sexuality and Orature: Emerging Perspectives

In more recent years, a small but growing body of scholarship has begun to challenge these silences by foregrounding sexuality, desire, and the body in African cultural expression. Scholars like Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Obioma Nnaemeka, and Nkiru Nzegwu have contributed significantly to this shift, arguing for a critical reassessment of indigenous African sexual epistemologies.[19] Bakare-Yusuf contends that African cultures have long possessed complex, nuanced frameworks for engaging with sexual pleasure and eroticism, but that these have been overshadowed by Western-derived notions of shame, purity, and moral panic.[20] Nnaemeka similarly advocates for an African feminist hermeneutic that takes seriously the ways women engage with, control, and subvert erotic power through oral forms such as wedding songs, lullabies, and laments.[21] These genres, while often dismissed as domestic or sentimental, in fact provide fertile ground for coded expressions of sexual agency, critique of male behaviour, and articulation of female desire.

Moreover, scholars such as Barber and Yankah have noted the metaphorical richness of African oral genres, particularly in the use of symbolic language to engage with socially delicate subjects like sex.[22] In her study of Yoruba *oríkì*, Barber demonstrates how praise poetry, while ostensibly celebratory, often contains subtle references to virility, fertility, and sexual prowess, embedded in nature metaphors or ancestral allusions.[23] Similarly, Yankah analyzes proverbs and courtship riddles among the Akan, revealing how communities encode sexual knowledge within familiar structures of play and wisdom.[24]

The Politics of Silence and Censorship

A recurring concern across much of the literature is the systematic silencing of indigenous sexual expression in African oral archives. Cornwall argues that colonial and missionary efforts to regulate sexual morality led to the erasure of public and ritual performances that involved erotic content.[25] In academic contexts, this was compounded by the discomfort of early folklorists and anthropologists who either avoided or mistranslated sexual content, reinforcing a Western moral framework in their analyses.[26] Furthermore, even in postcolonial African states, national cultural policies and educational curricula often exclude erotic oral forms,

deeming them incompatible with "respectable" public discourse.[27] The result is a double marginalization: first by colonial authority and later by nationalist modernity. This silence has also shaped gendered access to expression. While men's oral traditions—such as boast poetry or epic performance—are sometimes permitted to contain veiled references to sexual conquests, women's erotic speech, especially when openly expressed in initiation or wedding contexts, is often trivialized or ignored in literary scholarship.[28]

Gaps and the Need for Contextual, Comparative Inquiry

Despite these important contributions, the scope of the literature remains limited. Most existing studies touch on sexuality in passing or focus on representations of love rather than the language used during or about sexual acts. Few engage with the performance dynamics of erotic utterance—how it is received, interpreted, embodied, or contested in real-time communal settings. Likewise, there is insufficient comparative work that examines how different African cultures structure and ritualize sexual speech across genres and regions. This study addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on erotic language as an act of oral performance, investigating how verbal artistry is employed to symbolize, enact, and reflect on sexual acts within communal contexts. It contributes to the ongoing project of decolonizing African literary studies by recovering an erased and undervalued layer of indigenous knowledge—one in which the erotic is not shameful but symbolic, sacred, and deeply human.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in the disciplines of oral literature and folklore. The aim is to examine how erotic language is used during or about sexual acts in African oral traditions, with a particular emphasis on the symbolic, performative, and aesthetic functions of such language. Given the performative nature of orature, which encompasses both verbal artistry and embodied expression, the research methodology integrates textual analysis, performance ethnography, and comparative folklore studies to provide a multidimensional understanding of sexual discourse in oral traditions.

The primary sources for this study include a selection of transcribed and translated oral texts drawn from documented collections of African folklore and oral performance. These texts include folktales, praise poetry, initiation songs, riddles, and proverbs, sourced from the works of key scholars such as Finnegan, Barber, and Yankah.[29] The selection was guided by purposive sampling, targeting texts that explicitly or implicitly address sexual acts or erotic experiences, especially those performed in ritual or communal contexts such as courtship, initiation, and marriage ceremonies. The study focuses on a comparative range of African traditions—including but not limited to Xhosa, Yoruba, Shona, and Wolof cultures—ensuring both thematic focus and regional diversity.

In addition to oral texts, the study draws on ethnographic materials, including field notes, observer narratives, and archived audio or video recordings of performances. These materials provide valuable insights into the cultural and performative contexts of sexual language—how it is spoken, to whom, by whom, and under what ritual or social conditions. Where direct

observation of performances was not feasible, the study relies on performance ethnography as reconstructed through the triangulation of existing descriptive and interpretive sources.

The analysis uses a thematic and semiotic approach grounded in African oral aesthetics and performance theory. This involves close reading of the texts to identify erotic metaphors, euphemisms, tonal variations, and verbal structures such as repetition, rhythm, or call-and-response. The symbolic meanings of words and phrases are interpreted in relation to the specific cultural settings from which they emerge, drawing on folklore theory and the work of symbolic anthropologists. For instance, nature-based metaphors such as rivers, animals, and fruits are decoded for their erotic and social connotations, as observed in works like Barber's study of *oríkì* poetry.[30]

Attention is also paid to gendered expressions of sexuality, with analysis informed by African feminist hermeneutics. Scholars such as Nnaemeka and Bakare-Yusuf provide tools for understanding how women and men navigate, subvert, or affirm gender roles through erotic speech in oral traditions.[31] The study explores how women's oral genres—such as initiation chants or wedding songs—often encode forms of erotic agency, critique, and cultural instruction that have historically been overlooked or dismissed in academic discourse.

Although this research does not involve live human participants, it engages with ethical considerations concerning the representation and interpretation of culturally sensitive content. The study is guided by principles of cultural respect, avoiding sensationalism or reductive interpretations of sexual expression. Erotic speech in African orature is treated not as vulgar but as artistically and culturally meaningful, often operating within ritual frameworks that render it sacred, pedagogical, and symbolic. Furthermore, the research remains attentive to the historical distortions imposed by colonial, missionary, and postcolonial censorship, which have shaped how such texts are archived, translated, and studied.[32]

In sum, this methodological approach combines close textual analysis with cultural interpretation and performance theory, allowing for a rich exploration of the aesthetic, symbolic, and social dimensions of sexual language in African oral traditions. It affirms the legitimacy of erotic discourse as a serious subject within oral literature studies and seeks to recover and interpret its layered meanings with scholarly rigour and cultural sensitivity.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and analyzes selected oral texts that feature erotic language used during or in reference to sexual acts, drawing from African traditions across regions. The analysis focuses on how this language is embedded within specific genres—such as initiation songs, wedding chants, folktales, and proverbs—and explores its symbolic, pedagogical, and performative functions. Each subsection illustrates how African oral literature engages with sexuality as a culturally rich, artistically expressed, and socially mediated reality.

Initiation Songs: Erotic Instruction and Cultural Rite

In many African cultures, initiation ceremonies mark the transition from childhood to adulthood and often include detailed instruction on sexuality, fertility, and gender roles.

Among the Xhosa, for instance, *ulwaluko* (male initiation) and *intonjane* (female initiation) ceremonies feature songs and chants that incorporate erotic metaphors to educate initiates about bodily changes, sexual responsibility, and marital expectations. One Xhosa female initiation chant, recorded by McAllister, includes the lines: "When the moon shines, the river calls / She must dip her gourd and feel its depth."[33]

Here, the moon is a traditional symbol of female fertility, while the river metaphorically references both sexual readiness and the unknown territory of intimacy. The gourd, often associated with the womb or sexual receptivity, is used here to teach young women about bodily agency and the cultural importance of controlled initiation into pleasure. These performances are often communal, led by older women or ritual specialists, and serve as instruction and spiritual blessings. Rather than being explicit in a pornographic sense, the language is poetic and encoded, demanding interpretive engagement. Finnegan notes that such performances "celebrate sexuality not as taboo but as sacred knowledge passed through the generations."[34]

Wedding Chants: Celebrating Conjugal Pleasure

Wedding chants across various African traditions provide another rich context for the performance of erotic language. Among the Yoruba, the *iyawo* (bride) is often the subject of songs that blend praise, humour, and sexual innuendo. One example, documented by Barber includes the following lines: "She walks like the cassava stalk swaying in heat / Her waist speaks riddles to the man's eyes."[35]

Here, the cassava stalk, swaying and fertile, serves as an image of sensuality. At the same time, the bride's waist is anthropomorphised as a speaking entity—hinting at the nonverbal communication of sexual readiness and desire. These chants often take place in front of the entire community, making the bride's erotic potential not private but communal knowledge that affirms the social legitimacy of sexual pleasure within marriage. Such language serves multiple purposes: it teases, it celebrates, and it ritualizes the entry into conjugal sexuality. As Nnaemeka argues, women's participation in such chants often constitutes "a strategic performance of agency within culturally accepted forms."[36]

Folktales and Riddles: Encoding Erotic Knowledge

African folktales and riddles often use animal allegory, exaggeration, and metaphor to encode sexual themes. In a Shona folktale titled *The Tortoise and the Banana Grove*, the tortoise outwits other animals to reach the bananas, which are described as "moist, golden, and bending to his touch." Although ostensibly innocent, the imagery draws on symbols of fertility and erotic satisfaction, especially when coupled with the tortoise's repeated exclamation: "I came slowly, but I tasted first!" This double entendre is common in courtship and trickster tales, where characters associated with wit and patience (often male figures like the hare or tortoise) are rewarded with symbolic access to food, shelter, or lovers. Yankah notes that in Akan traditions, such tales often include "veiled allusions to sexual conquest or seduction, especially for youth audiences preparing for adulthood."[37]

Riddles used in courtship similarly feature erotic subtexts. One Xhosa riddle goes: "I knock once, twice, and am swallowed without chewing." The answer is a penis, but it is never stated openly—only understood within trusted circles. These forms of speech function as sexual pedagogy, social bonding, and entertainment, reinforcing community norms while allowing for play and innuendo.

Gendered Performances: Pleasure, Power, and Resistance

Erotic language in African oral traditions is often gendered, both in content and performance. Men's oral forms, such as praise poetry or boast songs, may highlight sexual prowess or conquest, while women's forms focus on bodily wisdom, pleasure, and critique. In Hausa *karuwanci* songs—sung by women performers known as *karuwai*—the erotic is openly celebrated, often mocking men's performance or elevating women's desire as central to sexual satisfaction. In one translated performance, a singer declares: "If your tongue is lazy, stay home / The calabash will not wait for dull water."[38] This metaphorical critique positions sexual satisfaction as a shared responsibility and asserts the woman's voice in assessing erotic compatibility. Such expressions challenge patriarchal control over female sexuality by affirming pleasure as a legitimate expectation. African feminist scholars have shown that these oral forms offer a means for subversive expression. Bakare-Yusuf suggests that women's erotic speech is a "form of embodied resistance" that navigates cultural constraints while asserting sexual agency through coded, communal language.[39]

The examples analysed here demonstrate that sexual language in African oral traditions is a rich, symbolic, and performative mode of expression. Whether in initiation rites, wedding chants, folktales, or riddles, erotic language functions to educate, affirm, challenge, and celebrate. It is deeply embedded within communal rituals and gendered performances, revealing an indigenous aesthetic of desire that is neither vulgar nor gratuitous, but meaningful, moral, and culturally resonant. By restoring attention to these oft-neglected expressions, we begin to see African orature not merely as moral instruction, but as a sophisticated archive of human intimacy, creativity, and symbolic power.

Discussion

The exploration of sexual language in African oral traditions, as presented in this study, reveals that the erotic is not a peripheral or taboo subject but a central expressive domain in indigenous knowledge systems. Across genres and cultural contexts, erotic language functions as a dynamic and multifaceted communicative tool—one that educates, ritualizes, affirms, critiques, and even subverts prevailing norms surrounding sexuality, gender, and power. Drawing from the theoretical lenses of performance theory, ethnopoetics, African feminist hermeneutics, and symbolic folklore analysis, this discussion offers an interpretive synthesis of the findings and reflects on their broader implications.

One of the most significant observations is the embeddedness of erotic language within ritual and communal life. In initiation songs and wedding chants, for example, sexual language is deployed not in isolation but as part of socially sanctioned rites of passage, where it serves

pedagogical and symbolic purposes. The analysis of Xhosa and Yoruba initiation and marriage performances demonstrates how communities encode erotic knowledge through metaphor, rhythm, and performance. These forms align with Bauman's conception of performance as a culturally situated event that communicates both aesthetic and social meaning.[40] Erotic utterances during these performances are not merely descriptive; they are ritualized acts of cultural transmission meant to affirm collective values about desire, gender roles, and fertility.

The data also underscore the artistic and symbolic sophistication with which African oral traditions handle sexuality. Whether in the metaphor of the river and the gourd in Xhosa initiation songs or in the swaying cassava stalk of Yoruba wedding chants, the erotic is rarely expressed in crude terms. Instead, it is mediated through rich symbolic imagery, often drawn from nature, daily life, and the ancestral world. This affirms the relevance of ethnopoetics in decoding the layered meanings of oral texts, and highlights how metaphor functions not simply as a poetic device but as a culturally rooted epistemology.[41]

Furthermore, the analysis reveals the gendered dynamics of erotic speech in African orature. Women's oral genres—such as initiation chants, wedding songs, and lamentations—offer a powerful space for articulating female desire, sexual agency, and critique. These expressions are often subtle yet subversive, operating within the boundaries of socially acceptable performance while enabling women to claim pleasure, assert standards, and mock male inadequacy. As Nnaemeka and Bakare-Yusuf argue, African feminist hermeneutics allows us to interpret these performances not as passive reflections of patriarchy but as strategic sites of resistance, humour, and embodied voice.[42] This is particularly evident in Hausa *karuwanci* songs, where sexual skill becomes a shared, evaluative terrain rather than a one-sided narrative of conquest.

At the same time, the discussion must recognize the historical and structural silencing of such expressions. As highlighted in the literature review, colonial and missionary interventions often erased or moralized erotic content in oral texts, distorting indigenous understandings of sexuality and performance. The enduring legacy of this censorship—combined with postcolonial discomfort with discussing sex in public discourse—has contributed to the marginalization of erotic speech in both academic and cultural spheres.[43] This study, therefore, participates in the broader decolonial project of recovering erased knowledge and affirming the validity of indigenous erotic discourse as a subject of serious literary and cultural analysis.

Importantly, the findings challenge the binary thinking that often characterizes global discourses on sex—as either vulgar or sacred, empowering or oppressive. African oral traditions offer a more nuanced, fluid, and context-sensitive approach to erotic language, one in which pleasure, education, ritual, and resistance coexist. The erotic is not simply about the body but about the social, symbolic, and spiritual dimensions of human connection. By re-examining erotic speech through the lens of oral literature and folklore, this study positions sexuality not as deviant but as deeply cultural, ethical, and literary.

In sum, the discussion affirms that erotic language in African orature serves as a legitimate and generative site of cultural expression. It is a language of pleasure, yes—but also of power, of pedagogy, and poetic invention. To ignore it is to misrepresent the fullness of African oral literature. As this study does, embracing it critically is to honour the depth, diversity, and resilience of African expressive traditions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to explore the often-overlooked role of sexual language in African oral traditions, particularly as it is performed during or in reference to sexual acts. Drawing on a range of genres—including initiation songs, wedding chants, folktales, and riddles—the research has demonstrated that erotic discourse in African orature is not only culturally sanctioned but also artistically refined, symbolically layered, and socially meaningful.

Through the lenses of performance theory, ethnopoetics, African feminist hermeneutics, and folklore studies, the analysis revealed that sexual language serves multiple functions: it instructs the young in sexual ethics, celebrates pleasure within socially approved unions, encodes gender norms, and provides subtle spaces for critique and resistance. The use of metaphor, euphemism, rhythm, and symbol allows communities to speak the erotic within acceptable boundaries, transforming what might be taboo into culturally resonant knowledge.

The study also reaffirmed the need to re-evaluate colonial and postcolonial biases that have historically marginalized or censored indigenous sexual expressions. Far from being vulgar or peripheral, erotic language in African oral literature is central to the transmission of values, identities, and embodied knowledge. It affirms that African cultures have long recognised sexuality as a sacred, educative, and expressive aspect of human life. By foregrounding the erotic as a serious subject within oral literature and folklore studies, this article contributes to the decolonization of African literary criticism and the reclamation of indigenous epistemologies around desire, intimacy, and pleasure.

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need to reframe how African oral traditions are studied, taught, and archived—particularly with regard to their treatment of erotic and sexual expression. In light of the themes explored and the gaps identified, several key recommendations emerge to guide future research, teaching, and cultural preservation efforts.

First, there is a strong case for the integration of erotic oral literature into academic curricula, especially within literature, folklore, and gender studies programmes. Too often, syllabi exclude or sanitize oral texts that contain sexual content, reinforcing colonial legacies of shame and moralistic censorship. Yet, as this study has shown, erotic language in oral traditions is not only artistically valuable but also culturally instructive. Its inclusion in classrooms—framed with critical and culturally sensitive pedagogy—would allow students to engage with a fuller spectrum of African expressive forms, deepening their understanding of oral aesthetics, communal values, and gendered performance.

Second, the study highlights the importance of expanding ethnographic and archival work on erotic speech genres, particularly those performed by women or within private ritual contexts. Much of the existing archive reflects a colonial or outsider gaze, often distorting or omitting sexually explicit material due to discomfort or imposed moral standards. As a result, many rich traditions of erotic performance remain undocumented or under-analysed. Scholars, especially those working within their own linguistic and cultural communities, should be encouraged to preserve these oral forms with ethical care and interpretive sensitivity. Such efforts are vital not only for academic enrichment but also for intergenerational cultural transmission.

Closely related is the need to decolonize African literary criticism by challenging the moral binaries and silences that have historically governed the study of sexuality in orature. The tendency to either exclude or trivialize erotic expression reflects deeper assumptions about what constitutes "serious" literature or appropriate research. This study affirms that the erotic is not antithetical to moral or philosophical thought, but often embodies it through coded language, performance, and metaphor. Scholars must resist the temptation to read indigenous eroticism through imported frameworks of vulgarity or deviance and instead engage it as a legitimate site of symbolic meaning and cultural insight.

Furthermore, future research should give sustained attention to gendered voices and performances within erotic oral traditions. As evidenced by the analysis of wedding chants and women's initiation songs, African women have historically used oral genres to express, negotiate, and even challenge sexual expectations placed upon them. These performances often carry subversive undertones, affirming female pleasure, agency, and critique. Feminist readings of these texts can illuminate how women's erotic voices function not merely as passive echoes of male desire but as active constructions of sexual identity and cultural memory.

Finally, this study recommends cross-cultural and comparative research into erotic expression in oral traditions across Africa—and between African and other indigenous or diasporic communities. While the current study draws on a limited set of linguistic and cultural examples, there is much to be gained from broader comparative analyses. Such research could uncover shared tropes, divergent symbolic codes, and culturally specific strategies for encoding intimacy, thus contributing to a more nuanced global understanding of sexuality in oral literature.

In sum, the recommendations call for a more open, rigorous, and culturally grounded engagement with erotic language in African orature. By broadening the scope of research, diversifying the archive, and embracing the symbolic richness of erotic expression, scholars and educators can honour the full complexity of African oral traditions and restore to them a voice that has long been misread, muted, or ignored.

Works Cited

Bakare-Yusuf, Bibi. 1999. "The Economy of Violence: Black Bodies and the Unspeakable Terror." In Price and Shildrick (eds.) *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (New York: Routledge): 311–323.

Barber, Karin. 1991. *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women, and the Past in a Yoruba Town.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Bauman, Richard. 1984. *Verbal Art as Performance.* Prospect Heights: Waveland Press.

Callaway, Barbara. 1987. *Muslim Hausa Women in Nigeria: Tradition and Change.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Cornwall, Andrea. 2005. "Introduction: Perspectives on Gender in Africa." In Cornwall (ed.), *Readings in Gender in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press): 1–19.

Finnegan, Ruth. 2012 [1970]. *Oral Literature in Africa.* Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

McAllister, Patrick A. 1998. "Ritual Passage, Moral Journey: Initiation, Gender and Ethics in South Africa." In Lambek and Strathern (eds.), *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspectives from Africa and Melanesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 236–257.

Nnaemeka, Obioma. 2005. "Mapping African Feminisms." In Cornwall (ed.), *Readings in Gender in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press): 31–40.

Nzegwu, Nkiru. 2006. *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture.* Albany: SUNY Press.

Okpewho, Isidore. 1992. *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Tedlock, Dennis. 1983. *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Yankah, Kwesi. 1989. *The Proverb in the Context of Akan Rhetoric: A Theory of Proverb Praxis.* New York: Peter Lang.

Notes

[1] Finnegan 2012, pp. 146-149.
[2] Barber 1991, pp. 9-11; Nnaemeka 2005, p. 35.
[3] Tedlock 1983, p. 62.
[4] Bakare-Yusuf 1999, p. 313; Nnaemeka 2005, p. 31-32.
[5] Finnegan 2012, pp. 153-154.
[6] Bakare-Yusuf 1999, p. 316.
[7] Bauman 1984; Tedlock 1983; Nnaemeka 2005.
[8] Bauman 1984, pp. 3-9
[9] Barber 1991, pp. 13-14.
[10] Tedlock 1983, pp. 46-48.
[11] Finnegan 2012, pp. 147-148.
[12] Nnaemeka 2005, pp. 32-35; Bakare-Yusuf 1999, pp. 314-316.
[13] Yankah 1989, pp. 71-73.
[14] Finnegan 2012, pp. 153-154; Bakare-Yusuf 1999, p. 312.
[15] Finnegan 2012; Okpewho 1992.
[16] Finnegan 2012, pp. 146-147.
[17] Okpewho 1992.
[18] Bakare-Yusuf 1999, p. 315; Cornwall 2005, p. 8.
[19] Bakare-Yusuf 1999, p. 316; Nnaemeka 2005; Nzegwu 2006.

[20] Bakare-Yusuf 1999, p. 313.
[21] Nnaemeka 2005.
[22] Barber 1991; Yankah 1989.
[23] Barber 1991, pp. 19-22.
[24] Yankah 1989, pp. 75-86.
[25] Cornwall 2005, pp. 7-9.
[26] Finnegan 2012, pp. 153-154.
[27] Bakare-Yusuf 1999, p. 317.
[28] Nnaemeka 2005, p. 35.
[29] Barber 1991; Yankah 1989.
[30] Barber 1991.
[31] Bakare-Yusuf 1999.
[32] Finnegan 2012; Cornwall 2005.
[33] McAllister 1998, p. 254.
[34] Finnegan 2012, pp. 146-147.
[35] Barber 1991, p. 77.
[36] Nnaemeka 2005, p. 34.
[37] Yankah 1989, p. 84.
[38] Callaway 1987, p. 112.
[39] Bakare-Yusuf 2003, p. 16.
[40] Bauman 1984.
[41] Tedlock 1983.
[42] Bakare-Yusuf 1999, p. 316.
[43] Finnegan 2012; Cornwall 2005.