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ORALITY AND AUTHORITARIANISM: THE PERFORMANCE OF POWER IN THE SPEECHES OF IDI AMIN OF UGANDA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intersection of orality and authoritarianism through a critical analysis of Idi Amin Dada's speeches (1971–1979). It argues that Amin's oratory, often dismissed in Western discourse as incoherent, was in fact a calculated performance of power deeply rooted in African oral aesthetics and epistemologies. Drawing on African orature theory (Finnegan, Okpewho), postcolonial performance studies (Barber, Mbembe), and decolonial communication frameworks (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o), the study demonstrates how Amin's use of proverbs, repetition, satire, allegory, and code-switching transformed speech into a culturally intelligible language of governance. Insights from Foucault's discourse theory and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital reveal speech as an instrument of control and legitimacy, while Tamale's feminist moral critique situates Amin's performative masculinity within patriarchal moral codes. Methodologically, the paper employs qualitative discourse and performance analysis of archival speeches, broadcasts, documentaries, and oral testimonies. The findings show that Amin's rhetoric fused aesthetics, morality, and coercion transforming violence into virtue and autocracy into a form of cultural familiarity. His self-mythologising titles and dramatic delivery positioned him simultaneously as griot, warrior, patriarch, and trickster, archetypes that resonated with Uganda's oral imagination while legitimising domination. The study concludes that orality in postcolonial Africa operates as a double-edged cultural technology both a vehicle for communal knowledge and an instrument of power. By situating Amin's rhetoric within broader African and global performance theories, the paper reframes authoritarianism as an oral digital continuum of spectacle, legitimacy, and memory.

Keywords: Idi Amin Dada, African Orature, Authoritarian Performance, Discourse and Power, Postcolonial Spectacle, Digital Afterlife of Orality

INTRODUCTION

The post-independence landscape of Africa was characterised by a surge of nationalistic optimism, driven by the hope that political sovereignty would usher in a new era of development, cultural revival, and democratic governance. Yet, for many newly independent nations, this vision was swiftly undercut by the emergence of military regimes and authoritarian rule. One of the most emblematic and controversial figures of this era was Idi Amin Dada, who ruled Uganda from 1971 to 1979 after seizing

power through a military coup. His tenure is widely remembered for its authoritarianism, economic deterioration, mass human rights violations, and flamboyant self-styling as "Life President," "Field Marshal," and "Conqueror of the British Empire" (Mutibwa, 1992: 119; Kasozi, 1994: 87). Beyond the documented brutality of his regime, however, lies a largely unexamined dimension of Amin's leadership: his strategic use of oral performance as a medium for

projecting power, shaping political narratives, and legitimizing authoritarian control.

Much of the existing scholarship on Idi Amin focuses on the political and military dimensions of his rule, often portraying his public persona as irrational, buffoonish, or propagandistic (Mamdani, 2004; Mutibwa, 1992). This body of literature, while indispensable, has tended to overlook the cultural and rhetorical technologies through which Amin connected with his audiences, particularly his deployment of oral traditions and indigenous performance styles. Amin's speeches were not random outbursts but carefully constructed performances imbued with the discursive logics of African orality: proverbs, repetition, storytelling, satire, and code-switching between English, Luganda, and Kiswahili. These oral strategies enabled him to craft a populist persona that was at once terrifying and familiar, evoking archetypes of the warrior-king, the griot, the trickster, and the patriarch all of which hold deep resonance in African oral cultures (Finnegan, 2012:23; Okpewho, 1992:5).

This study aims to address the scholarly neglect of these oral-rhetorical dimensions by re-examining Amin's speeches as performances of power grounded in vernacular epistemologies. It examines how Amin utilized the resources of orality to establish authority, convey state ideology, and manage public perception during his reign. The central aim is to explore the interface between orality and authoritarianism, arguing that Amin's speeches served not only as tools of propaganda but as culturally grounded performances that mobilised oral tradition in the service of autocratic rule. In doing so, the paper asks how the forms and aesthetics of African orature enabled Amin to naturalise his rule, articulate populist legitimacy, and diffuse his authoritarian vision across different segments of Ugandan society.

To address this objective, the study draws on a theoretical framework that integrates African oral literature theory, postcolonial performance studies, and decolonial communication theory. Foundational

to this analysis is the work of Ruth Finnegan (2012), who insists that oral literature must be understood not only as a mode of storytelling but as a dynamic, performative cultural system that shapes how knowledge is communicated and authority is enacted. Similarly, Isidore Okpewho (1992) provides a robust framework for interpreting the structural and rhetorical devices of orature, such as repetition, symbolism, and communal idioms, which are crucial to decoding Amin's communicative style.

In engaging with the politics of spectacle and performance, the study also draws on Achille Mbembe's (2001) critique of postcolonial power as a form of theatricality. Mbembe argues that African autocracies often function through grotesque displays of domination and public rituals that blur the lines between parody and violence (Mbembe, 2001: 104). This lens allows us to view Amin's linguistic flamboyance, satirical threats, and performative gestures as more than erratic behaviour they become expressions of power through performance, rooted in historically resonant idioms. Finally, the paper draws on the insights of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), who advocates for the decolonization of language and communication, emphasizing the need to reclaim African languages and oral forms as legitimate vehicles for political thought and expression. By doing so, the study positions Amin's orality not as a deviation from modern statecraft but as a culturally embedded political technology that challenges Eurocentric models of leadership and rhetorical authority. This study, therefore, seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) How does Amin's use of orality function as a performative instrument of power?
- 2) In what ways do African oral traditions both authorize and obscure authoritarian practices?
- 3) What does Amin's rhetorical style reveal about the relationship between culture, communication, and political legitimacy in postcolonial Africa?

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to a decolonial re-reading of political communication in postcolonial Africa. It invites scholars to take seriously the performative and rhetorical dimensions of orality in understanding how authoritarian power is articulated, sustained, and made intelligible in culturally specific contexts. More broadly, it challenges the tendency to interpret African political speech through Western textualist paradigms by foregrounding the epistemic authority of the spoken word. By reinterpreting Idi Amin's speeches as performances of orality, the study not only recovers a neglected dimension of his rule but also illuminates how cultural forms can serve as both instruments of political domination and tools of resistance.

Literature Review

The relationship between orality and political authority in postcolonial Africa occupies an important but underdeveloped space within African studies, rhetorical theory, and political discourse analysis. While the oral tradition has long been recognised as central to African modes of communication and social organisation, its role in the construction and consolidation of authoritarian power has not received sustained scholarly attention. Scholars such as Ruth Finnegan (2012) and Isidore Okpewho (1992) laid the foundational groundwork for understanding orature as a structured system of communication embedded in African cultural logic. Finnegan characterises orality not simply as informal speech but as a rich tapestry of communicative genres—proverbs, storytelling, chants, praise poetry, allegory, and satire—each with distinct rhetorical functions and sociopolitical implications (Finnegan, 2012: 23–31). Okpewho similarly insists that oral literature is a dynamic site of knowledge production, capable of transmitting authority, enforcing norms, and shaping collective memory (Okpewho, 1992: 5). These insights are essential for recognising the epistemic authority of the spoken word within African sociopolitical contexts.

Within the fields of political anthropology and performance studies, scholars such as Karin Barber (2007) have further demonstrated how public speech acts in African societies are highly performative, often operating within ritualized frameworks that blur the boundaries between governance, spectacle, and storytelling. Barber highlights how political leaders strategically manipulate traditional communicative forms to establish authority, legitimize their rule, and garner moral capital from the people's oral imagination (Barber, 2007: 218–220). These themes are echoed by Paulla Ebron (2002), who explores how cultural performance in West Africa can be instrumentalised to both resist and reproduce hierarchical power, and by Eboussi Boulaga (1984), who critiques postcolonial political oratory as a theatricalisation of power that often conceals violence through ceremonial grandeur. Such studies provide essential tools for analysing how leaders like Idi Amin did not merely rule through coercion or bureaucracy but through symbolic performance grounded in oral tradition.

The theoretical contributions of Achille Mbembe (2001) offer a particularly sharp lens through which to examine Amin's political rhetoric. In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe argues that African authoritarianism often functions through grotesque spectacle, absurd self-magnification, and ritualised excess. He describes how postcolonial rulers produce a "commandment" that draws heavily on the aesthetic economy of excess, creating a political theatre that is simultaneously terrifying and comic, sacred and ridiculous (Mbembe, 2001: 104–110). Idi Amin's self-designations—such as "Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea" or "Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular"—fit squarely within this Mbembean paradigm of performative authoritarianism. In this framework, Amin's oratory can be read not merely as propaganda, but as a cultural script—a form of state ritual where oral tradition is appropriated to naturalize violence and mystify domination.

The language politics embedded in Amin's speeches also align with the decolonial critiques of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), who argues that the reclamation of African languages is central to the liberation of African epistemologies. Ngũgĩ warns against the alienation caused by privileging colonial languages in African public life, insisting that meaningful cultural resistance must occur in indigenous idioms (Ngũgĩ, 1986:17). Amin's frequent code-switching between English, Kiswahili, and Luganda—though often mocked in the Western press—was in fact a strategic performance of vernacular legitimacy, a way of embedding himself in the sonic and linguistic landscape of Uganda's diverse populace. This aligns with Blommaert's (1999) work on linguistic inequality and voice, where multilingual practices in postcolonial Africa are shown to be deeply political, reflecting struggles over belonging, access, and symbolic capital. Alamin Mazrui (1998) and Nekvapil (2016) also show how language choices in African leadership settings are never ideologically neutral, often operating as markers of cultural proximity or distance.

Beyond formal discourse analysis, the popular memory of Amin's speeches offers another crucial dimension of inquiry. As Jan Vansina (1985) notes, oral narratives often outlive their political contexts, transforming over time into cultural memory and political folklore. In Uganda, Amin's rhetorical legacy endures in parodies, imitations, anecdotes, and popular songs, illustrating how oral memory continues to influence political consciousness. This is not unique to Uganda. Mbugua wa-Mungai (2010) and Stephanie Newell (2011) have shown how African leaders are frequently reimagined in popular narratives, often through satirical reinvention, revealing collective anxieties and aspirations. Annabel Tremlett (2014) and Ebenezer Obadare (2009) further explore how humour, mimicry, and ridicule become tools for public commentary and soft resistance, often mediated through oral performance.

Amin's enduring image in cinema and global culture also deserves attention. In *The Last King of Scotland* (Macdonald, 2006), Amin is depicted as both a monstrous tyrant and a charismatic populist—a cinematic representation that draws on documented patterns in his actual speech performances. Though stylised, the film captures the contradictions of Amin's rhetorical persona, combining fatherly intimacy with unpredictable menace. This portrayal is supported by Barbet Schroeder's 1974 documentary *General Idi Amin Dada: A Self-Portrait*, which allows Amin to perform his own narrative, unfiltered by journalistic interpretation. In these portrayals, we witness the fusion of orality, myth, and political theatre, which continue to shape how Amin is remembered globally and domestically.

Despite these emerging insights, a significant gap remains in the literature concerning how orality has functioned not merely as a cultural heritage, but as a mechanism of state power in authoritarian regimes. Scholars like Chinweizu et al. (1980) have discussed the political uses of African oral forms in nationalist contexts, but relatively few have explored their instrumentalisation in the service of repression. This study, therefore, contributes to filling that gap by repositioning Amin's orality as a performance of power that drew from and simultaneously distorted traditional oral modes. It insists that to fully understand postcolonial African authoritarianism, one must consider not only the institutions of state violence but also the performative logics, linguistic tactics, and oral strategies through which that violence is made familiar, intelligible, and, at times, legitimate.

While existing scholarship richly explores orality as a mode of cultural expression, few studies interrogate its complicity in state power and authoritarianism. This paper contributes to closing that gap by demonstrating how the aesthetics of orality once mobilised for resistance—were re-functioned under Amin to serve as a medium of coercion and populist legitimisation. It thus reframes orality as a political

instrument within the moral economy of the postcolony

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the theoretical foundations of African orature, particularly the works of Isidore Okpewho and Ruth Finnegan, who illuminate the structural and performative dynamics of oral literature. Finnegan (2012) argues that African orality is not merely a vehicle for storytelling but a culturally embedded system of knowledge, aesthetics, and authority, where rhetorical tools such as repetition, metaphor, and communal address carry both didactic and political weight. Okpewho (1992) reinforces this by asserting that orature operates as a living archive of a people's worldview, capable of shaping both memory and moral consciousness. In Idi Amin's speeches, the recurrence of proverbial language, allegory, and performative cadence directly aligns with these typologies of orality, offering a framework for understanding his rhetoric as an indigenous mode of political expression.

Complementing this is Achille Mbembe's (2001) concept of the postcolony as a site of grotesque performance, where power is enacted through spectacle and ritual, often blurring the line between parody and violence. Karin Barber's (2007) insights on public performance further guide this analysis by highlighting how leaders manipulate cultural scripts to gain visibility and legitimacy.

Additionally, Sylvia Tamale (2014) extends this conversation by introducing a feminist moral lens that interrogates how patriarchal norms, sexuality, and moral performance intersect within African political discourse. Her framework illuminates how orality becomes a gendered site of power, where the performative masculinity of leaders such as Amin reinforces patriarchal moral codes while simultaneously drawing authority from culturally sanctioned expressions of male dominance. Tamale's intervention thus adds a crucial ethical and gendered dimension to understanding orality as a performative instrument of political control.

Finally, the study draws on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) theory of linguistic decolonisation, which calls for the reclamation of indigenous communicative practices as valid epistemologies. Together, these frameworks reveal how Amin's performative speeches far from being rhetorical anomalies were strategic deployments of culturally resonant orality to enact and consolidate power. In African oral cultures, such "performance of power" is not peripheral to politics but central to its execution and public intelligibility. In addition, Michel Foucault's (1977) conception of discourse as an instrument and effect of power provides a complementary lens through which Amin's orality can be read as a regime of truth production. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic capital elucidates how linguistic style and charisma translate into political legitimacy, offering further insight into Amin's performative authority.

This theoretical constellation demonstrates that Idi Amin's rhetoric cannot be divorced from the deep cultural, moral, and symbolic economies that inform African modes of communication and authority. Through the intersecting lenses of orature, performance, gender, and discourse, the framework reveals that Amin's orality was not a spontaneous display of charisma but a deliberate cultural performance rooted in indigenous epistemologies, patriarchal moral codes, and postcolonial anxieties of legitimacy. Together, these theories affirm that orality in African political life functions simultaneously as an aesthetic practice, a moral discourse, and a mechanism of power—one through which authority is spoken, embodied, and socially validated.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative discourse and performance analysis to interrogate the rhetorical strategies and cultural meanings embedded in Idi Amin's public speeches between 1971 and 1979. Rather than treating Amin's utterances as static or literal declarations, the analysis approaches them as performative texts—oral events in which language,

gesture, and charisma converge to enact power. Through this lens, Amin's rhetoric is understood as a complex communicative performance rooted in African oral traditions, where authority is not only spoken but also dramatized, sung, and embodied. The methodological focus thus lies in examining how orality becomes a political technology, shaping public sentiment, legitimizing autocratic rule, and translating political control into cultural familiarity.

The study is interpretive and hermeneutic, guided by analytical procedures drawn from performance studies, oral literature, and critical discourse analysis (CDA). These frameworks enable the close reading of speech acts, the decoding of symbolic imagery, and the contextualization of rhetorical patterns within Uganda's socio-political history of the 1970s. The analysis explores how Amin mobilized proverbs, repetition, humor, and moral allegory as communicative tools, and how his delivery tone, rhythm, pauses, laughter, and gestures functioned as forms of oral authorship and moral persuasion. In line with Barber's (2007) argument that African texts "are made in the moment of performance," Amin's orality is examined as a live, interactive process of meaning-making between leader and audience.

Primary data comprise a curated selection of archival materials, including speeches, radio broadcasts, television newsreels, and press statements retrieved from the Uganda Broadcasting Service Archives, BBC Monitoring Reports, Pan-African Archives in Addis Ababa, and international repositories. These materials were triangulated with secondary sources, including contemporaneous newspaper reports, memoirs, and scholarly accounts of Amin's regime. Each speech was examined for linguistic and performative features metaphor, proverb, code-switching, rhythm, and gesture and situated within its immediate political context to assess both performative intent and audience reception.

To ensure methodological transparency and analytical rigour, three appendices accompany the study:

Appendix A provides a comprehensive table of the primary speeches and archival materials analysed, detailing their dates, contexts, and linguistic characteristics. This tabular mapping clarifies the provenance of the data and the link between empirical sources and interpretive findings.

Appendix B identifies the thematic codes and oral-literary devices distilled from the analysis such as moral purification, humour, and spectacle—demonstrating how these oral forms were systematically categorised and interpreted.

Appendix C presents the analytical framework aligning each thematic code with the study's research questions, theoretical lenses, and interpretive outcomes, thereby illustrating how the theoretical apparatus (Ong, Barber, Finnegan, Mbembe, Tamale, Bourdieu, Foucault) was operationalised in practice.

The integration of these appendices transforms what might otherwise appear as abstract theoretical engagement into a methodologically traceable process—linking archival data to conceptual interpretation and empirical evidence to analytical reasoning. This triangulated approach strengthens validity, while the transparent documentation of sources and analytical pathways enhances scholarly reliability.

Ethical considerations were integral to the research design. Given the violence and propaganda associated with Amin's regime, the study maintains scholarly neutrality, avoiding sensationalism or moral judgement. Archival gaps and the retrospective nature of interpretation are acknowledged as inherent limitations, yet mitigated through cross-referencing and careful contextualisation. The inclusion of public domain materials ensures adherence to academic ethical standards while respecting the integrity of oral and historical testimony.

Ultimately, this methodological approach enables the study to reveal how Amin's speeches operated as performative sites of power—where the aesthetics of oral tradition intersected with authoritarian

spectacle. By embedding the analysis within a documented and reflexive research structure (Appendices A–C), the study affirms the credibility of its findings and exemplifies how oral performance analysis can serve as a rigorous mode of political and cultural critique in African scholarship.

Idi Amin and the Oral Performance of Power

Idi Amin's public speeches, often dismissed by Western observers as erratic or comic, were in fact deliberate performances rooted in the rhetorical conventions of African orality. His use of proverbs and idioms was both strategic and culturally resonant. In a 1972 address justifying the expulsion of Asians from Uganda, Amin declared: "When you cook for a guest and he overstays, he becomes the owner of your house" (British Pathé, 1972). This proverb, widely understood in East African cultures, reframed a complex economic policy as a moral response to cultural intrusion. In another speech aired by Radio Uganda, Amin likened Uganda's need for self-reliance to "a cow that must learn to graze without depending on herder's salt", deploying pastoral imagery familiar to rural communities (UBC Archives, 1973). These proverbial formulations allowed him to root controversial policies in vernacular logic, presenting authoritarian decisions as traditional wisdom.

Repetition and rhythm played a central role in galvanising support and embedding key messages. In multiple public rallies—such as the 1975 Liberation Day speech in Kampala—Amin chanted, "We shall never be colonised again!" and "Africa for Africans!" echoing the musicality of African praise poetry and mobilizing nationalist sentiment (Reuters, 1975). These refrains, delivered with increasing vocal intensity, mirrored the cadence of call-and-response in oral performance, drawing the audience in and evoking emotional resonance. This stylistic choice reflects Finnegan's (2012: 173) observation that repetition in oral cultures serves not only to reinforce memory but also to affirm the collective, reinforcing leadership through rhythm and shared ideology. Viewed through the lens of African orature

theory, these expressions are not random idioms but performative devices that translate state ideology into familiar oral syntax, reinforcing Mbembe's notion of power as spectacle.

Amin's frequent code-switching between English, Kiswahili, and Luganda was another hallmark of his oral strategy. In *General Idi Amin Dada: A Self-Portrait* (1974), directed by Barbet Schroeder, Amin delivers a televised message in English, only to pivot into Kiswahili with laughter and warmth when addressing his soldiers. This move established both formal authority and cultural intimacy, allowing him to navigate multiple registers of power. When speaking to the Organisation of African Unity in 1975, he began with formal English but interspersed it with proverbs in Luganda, a tactic that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986: 17) would describe as linguistic sovereignty—the assertion of identity and authority through native speech.

Storytelling and allegory were also evident in Amin's rhetoric. In a 1976 radio address following the Entebbe raid, Amin claimed, "The lion may sleep, but it does not forget the scent of enemies," casting Uganda as a lion disturbed by foreign aggression (Radio Uganda, 1976). Such animal allegories—deeply embedded in African oral storytelling—reduced global geopolitics into accessible moral tales, with Amin positioned as both protector and protagonist. In rural outreach speeches in Arua and Gulu, he narrated parables about "greedy goats entering other people's gardens," subtly referring to Western interference and regional dissent (Daily Monitor Archives, 1977). These allegorical techniques enabled Amin to mask violence with narrative familiarity, creating an illusion of justice rooted in folklore.

Finally, Amin's speeches were often laced with hyperbole and satire, blurring the line between statecraft and grotesque theatre. His self-styled titles—"Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Seas," "His Excellency President for Life," and "Conqueror of the British Empire"—were not mere eccentricities but performative declarations of

absolute power (British Pathé, 1977). As captured in Schroeder's documentary (1974), these titles were often delivered with a smirk or dramatic flair, turning state rhetoric into spectacle. Mbembe (2001:104) characterises this mode as postcolonial commandment, where power is enacted through excess and satire, rendering the state both fearsome and absurd. In Amin's case, these flamboyant titles served to dismantle colonial hierarchies symbolically while consolidating domestic control through exaggerated authority. Comparable performative strategies were evident in Mobutu Sese Seko's 'Authenticité' campaign in Zaire, where traditional rhetoric and costumes were employed to stage political unity, underscoring the pan-African phenomenon of postcolonial leaders deploying orality as spectacle.

In sum, Idi Amin's oratory was far more than an outlet for political messaging. It was a culturally grounded performance of power. Through the use of proverbs, rhythmic repetition, multilingualism, allegory, and theatrical exaggeration, Amin spoke a language his audiences could decode not only cognitively but culturally. His speeches functioned within the framework of African orature, and by embodying the role of trickster, warrior, and patriarch, he invoked archetypes familiar in communal memory. This fusion of oral aesthetics and autocratic politics demonstrates how orality can serve not only to preserve culture but to enforce authority.

Authoritarianism Through Familiar Forms

Idi Amin's regime exemplifies the paradoxical power of orality in African political culture—how familiar cultural forms, rooted in communal storytelling, proverb use, and performative charisma, could be appropriated to legitimise autocracy. Unlike many African leaders who sought to emulate Western diplomatic decorum, Amin spoke the language of the street, the market, and the courtyard. He drew on Uganda's oral repertoire to cloak violence in cultural familiarity, mobilizing proverbs, satire, and symbolic theatre to construct an image of himself as not

merely a political figure but also as a moral and ancestral authority. As Finnegan (2012:98) observes, oral performance in Africa is rarely a neutral act—it is embedded in systems of power, hierarchy, and ritual recognition. In Amin's case, the appropriation of oral forms gave his otherwise repressive regime an aura of affective legitimacy among segments of the population who identified with the cultural idioms he deployed.

Amin's speeches, for instance, frequently borrowed the structure of the folktale, where the central hero (himself) defends the community from external threats (imperialists, Asians, dissenters) and internal traitors (political opponents, intellectuals). This narrative form allowed him to reduce complex political crises into moral binaries that the public could easily grasp—good versus evil, tradition versus foreign influence. In a 1974 broadcast captured in *General Idi Amin Dada: A Self-Portrait* (Schroeder, 1974), Amin refers to expelled Asian businessmen as "snakes in the granary," invoking a metaphor that frames his economic nationalism in terms of ancestral vigilance against corruption. The use of such allegorical speech did more than dramatize policy—it evoked shared cultural fears, transforming policy into moral obligation. In so doing, Amin's orality lent affective force to authoritarianism, blurring the boundary between political power and communal defense.

Moreover, Amin blended folk performance with state spectacle, creating a hybrid political theatre where the machinery of repression was softened, at times even normalised, by the humorous and ceremonial register of his public persona. Achille Mbembe (2001:110) argues that in postcolonial African regimes, the grotesque and the theatrical become techniques of governance. In Amin's case, this was evident in the exaggerated titles he gave himself—"Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea", "Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular"—which, though absurd to international audiences, played into the oral tradition of praise poetry that

celebrates leaders through hyperbole and cosmic metaphors (Mbembe, 2001: 110; Barber, 2007: 244). These titles were not merely rhetorical excess—they positioned Amin within a lineage of traditional authority, appealing to indigenous models of kingship and spiritual power.

Amin also weaponised humour and satire to disarm dissent and project an image of confident invincibility. His public jokes—often delivered in Swahili or Luganda—about Britain’s declining empire or his own physical strength served both as political mockery and community entertainment. As Barber (2007: 215) explains, the power of oral performance lies in its ability to simultaneously entertain, educate, and discipline. Amin exploited this multifunctionality to mobilise loyalty, reduce fear to a manageable spectacle, and elevate himself above criticism through performative absurdity. Even those who doubted his leadership were drawn to the familiarity of his speech style and the sense of intimacy it conveyed. His orality thus functioned not only as a populist strategy but as a ritualised mechanism of coercion, shaping the collective consciousness of a people through repetition and performative proximity.

Beyond aesthetics, Amin’s rhetoric drew upon moral psychology embedded in oral traditions. Proverbs such as ‘the snake in the granary’ invoked collective responsibility and fear of contamination—transforming moral idioms into instruments of surveillance. By converting communal ethics into political obedience, Amin blurred the line between moral virtue and patriotic loyalty.

The paradox, however, lies in how indigenous idioms and oral traditions, once used to challenge colonial power, were now being harnessed to reinforce autocratic rule. What had historically been forms of resistance and cultural resilience were recontextualised under Amin to serve the machinery of authoritarianism. By speaking like a griot, acting like a trickster, and presenting himself as a warrior-protector of the people, Amin drew from the cultural archive of orality to mask state violence under the

veil of cultural authenticity. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986: 21) has warned, the recuperation of indigenous forms without political accountability risks legitimising domination through the very tools meant to challenge it. In Amin’s Uganda, orality was not silenced it was co-opted, becoming a powerful medium through which the dictator could maintain control while appearing to speak in the voice of the people.

Spectacle, Memory, and Afterlife

The performative orality that characterised Idi Amin’s rule did not vanish with his ousting in 1979. Instead, it evolved into a potent afterlife of political memory, preserved in the oral narratives, popular culture, and mediated folklore of Uganda and beyond. Amin’s speeches, titles, and rhetorical flamboyance have remained embedded in collective memory, recycled through parody, myth, and performance as symbolic representations of both absurdity and trauma. As Finnegan (2012:136) reminds us, oral texts are never fixed; they are constantly regenerated in performance, reshaped to speak to new generations. In this light, Amin’s rhetorical legacy endures not only through formal archives but also in the dynamic oral and cultural traditions that have mythologized his persona.

Across Uganda and the African continent, Amin has become a legendary figure in informal discourse, sometimes vilified as a tyrant, other times recalled with nostalgia or amusement. He is regularly invoked in political jokes, satirical songs, and folk references that blend fact with exaggeration—an extension of his own use of orality. This is evident in street narratives and local radio programmes where citizens mimic Amin’s iconic phrases or mock his grandiose titles. Barber (2007:219) notes that in African performance cultures, the memory of public figures is often sustained not by institutional historiography, but through community re-enactment, laughter, and rumour. Amin’s oral legacy thrives precisely because his rule was lived and remembered not only through fear, but through the

spectacle of power he staged in culturally resonant ways.

This legacy has also found powerful expression in film, literature, and global media, especially through representations that centre on the performative eccentricities of Amin's leadership. In *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), Forest Whitaker's Oscar-winning portrayal of Amin captures the charismatic volatility and rhetorical agility that defined his rule. The film, while fictionalised, draws on documented speeches and reported episodes of Amin's grotesque political theatre, such as his self-styling as "King of Scotland" and his theatrically staged meetings with foreign leaders (Macdonald, 2006). These cinematic portrayals, though mediated through Western lenses, have further solidified Amin's image as both a tyrant and an entertainer, blending historical truth with dramatic license. As Mbembe (2001: 108) argues, the postcolonial state often survives in public memory not as a bureaucratic entity but as a carnivalesque spectacle, and Amin's afterlife exemplifies this dynamic.

Beyond media portrayals, Amin's oral legacy offers critical insights into African political discourse. It illustrates how rhetoric, performance, and memory intersect in the construction of political legitimacy and the interpretation of state power. Even in post-Amin Uganda, the invocation of his name serves as a cultural shorthand for unchecked power, populist appeal, and performative governance. This suggests that African political culture, particularly in oral societies, is not solely shaped by constitutions and institutions, but by the residue of past performances. As Okpewho (1992: 201) notes, the power of oral narrative lies in its ability to convey both aspirational and cautionary political values. Amin's enduring visibility in oral memory reveals how the spoken word and its embodied performance continue to influence perceptions of leadership, power, and historical meaning across generations.

In recent years, Amin's speeches have resurfaced on digital platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, where excerpts are remixed for humour or political

commentary. This digital re-performance underscores the persistence of oral memory in new media forms, extending Finnegan's notion of oral regeneration into the age of algorithmic circulation.

Thus, the afterlife of Amin's rhetoric affirms the centrality of oral tradition in archiving political memory. His speeches imbued with proverb, humour, satire, and hyperbole have outlived the regime that produced them, circulating as fragments of a national mythology that is at once tragic and theatrical. Their continued relevance underscores the need to read African political discourse through the lens of performance and orality, recognising that what is said and how it is said can shape how power is remembered, challenged, or romanticised long after the regime has passed.

Conclusion

This paper aims to explore the intersection between orality and authoritarianism in postcolonial Africa, using Idi Amin's speeches as a focal point for examining how political power is performed, legitimized, and remembered through oral cultural forms. The findings demonstrate that orality in Amin's regime was not incidental or ornamental; it was central to the production of political meaning, the performance of state power, and the construction of national identity. Drawing from the aesthetics of African oral tradition—proverbs, allegory, repetition, satire, and performative rhythm—Amin effectively deployed a rhetoric of familiarity that transformed autocracy into something culturally recognisable and, for some, even palatable.

Far from being a political anomaly, Amin's speeches reveal how orality can serve as a double-edged sword: a tool for mobilising populist affect, but also a medium for cloaking repression in symbolic legitimacy. His ability to occupy the roles of griot, warrior, trickster, and protector allowed him to narrate state violence as community defense and to reframe political exclusion as national purification. Such performative versatility drew deeply from the communal and participatory logics of oral tradition,

giving his authoritarianism a folk-theatrical quality that made it intelligible and emotionally resonant for large segments of the population. As Finnegan (2012:31) and Barber (2007: 219) argue, the power of orature lies not only in what is said, but in how it is staged and received. Amin's speeches embodied this principle in full.

The implications of this analysis stretch beyond the case of Uganda. It urges scholars and observers of African politics to recalibrate their analytical frameworks, moving beyond the primacy of written texts, official documents, and institutional theory. In many postcolonial African societies, the spoken word remains a primary site of political engagement and the production of legitimacy. It is in the rhythm of a proverb, the cadence of a public speech, or the dramatic pause of a traditional storyteller that power is often most visibly enacted and understood. Western political science has long privileged the documented over the performed, but as this study has shown, authoritarianism in Africa often operates through semiotic channels deeply rooted in oral epistemologies. Thus, political performance, especially when interwoven with indigenous idioms, can render authoritarianism not only effective but enduring in the public imagination.

This research also complicates romanticised assumptions about African orality as inherently democratic or resistant. While oral tradition has long been viewed as a tool of cultural resilience and anti-colonial expression, this study reveals its susceptibility to co-optation by repressive regimes. Amin's use of folktale structures, warrior allegories, and praise-poem hyperbole to bolster his rule suggests that oral forms, like any cultural resource, can be weaponised. The challenge, then, is not to idealise orality, but to critically engage its political plasticity its ability to both contest and consolidate power, to inspire solidarity and impose silence, depending on the hands and mouths through which it moves.

Equally significant is the afterlife of Amin's rhetoric, which continues to circulate in Uganda and across

Africa in oral memory, comedy, popular film, and folklore. His voice lives on in mimicked phrases, satirical sketches, whispered recollections of fear and awe, and in cinematic reinterpretations, such as *The Last King of Scotland* (Macdonald, 2006). These reperformances demonstrate that political oratory does not die with the regime—it becomes part of national mythology, shaping how power is remembered, contested, or romanticized by future generations. The enduring visibility of Amin's speeches underscores the importance of studying memory as a performative, rather than just archival, phenomenon. As Mbembe (2001: 104–108) points out, in the post colony, the grotesque, the spectacular, and the theatrical do not simply pass—they haunt, and they return.

Looking ahead, this study opens important pathways for future research on the role of orality in postcolonial statecraft. Comparative studies could examine how leaders across different African contexts—such as Mobutu Sese Seko, Thomas Sankara, Nelson Mandela, or Julius Nyerere—utilized orality to consolidate power, democratize political discourse, or mobilize grassroots change. Another promising avenue lies in the exploration of digital orality how social media, YouTube, podcasts, and mobile communication platforms are creating new terrains for oral political performance, particularly among youth and activist movements. As traditional orature intersects with digital technologies, the contours of African political expression are being redefined, and the implications for both authoritarian control and democratic resistance deserve scholarly attention.

By situating Idi Amin's speeches within African orature theory, this study extends existing debates on performance and power by revealing the complicity of orality in the moral economy of the postcolony. It therefore contributes a new interpretive framework for understanding the performative logic of African authoritarianism.

In closing, this study reaffirms the thesis that in African political contexts, power is not only written

into laws, constitutions, or treaties it is also performed, narrated, and spoken into being. Idi Amin's speeches, when viewed through the lens of African orature, offer more than a portrait of excess and terror; they provide a window into how leaders harness cultural form to assert control, command loyalty, and construct political meaning. By listening closely to the rhythms, metaphors, and performances of state power, scholars can gain a deeper, more culturally grounded understanding of how authoritarianism speaks and how it continues to echo long after the microphone is turned off.

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Appendix A: Primary Speeches and Archival Materials Analysed

This appendix presents a detailed tabular mapping of the speeches and archival materials examined in the study. It clarifies the provenance of the data and demonstrates how each speech's historical context, medium, and linguistic/performative features informed the interpretive findings.

No	Speech /source Title	Date/Period	Context and Venue	Archival Source /Medium	Key Linguistic and Performative Features
1	"Statement on the Military Takeover"	25 January 1971	National broadcast following Amin's coup d'état	Uganda Radio Archives (Audio Recording)	Simple diction and repetitive phrasing ("peace," "discipline," "brothers") establish moral legitimacy. The use of inclusive pronouns ("we," "our") reinforces a collective identity.
2	"Address to the Nation on Economic War"	4 August 1972	Kampala, following the expulsion of Asians from Uganda	BBC Monitoring Service Transcript (1972)	Combines religious orality with populist idioms ("God is on our side"). Metaphors of cleansing and rebirth invoke ritual purification, a common theme in oral moral narratives.
3	"Speech to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU)"	10 October 1976	Kampala OAU Summit (as Chairperson)	Pan-African Archives, Addis Ababa	Proverbial rhetoric ("When the monkey laughs at the leopard...") and rhythmic repetition emulate the oral storytelling tradition. The performative tone projects charisma and continental unity.
4	"Address to Ugandan Troops"	July 1976	Independence Day celebration, Kololo Airstrip	Uganda Television Newsreel (UTV), 1976	Command tone mixed with humour and a proverb ("A lion does not consult the goat before a hunt"). Reflects military masculinity and the use of oral imagery for discipline.

				Reuters	Video	
5	"Press Conference after Entebbe Raid"	March 1977	Kampala State House	Archive		Rapid code-switching between English, Kiswahili, and Luganda; laughter and self-aggrandising humour; theatrical gesturing. Illustrates orality as spectacle and psychological warfare.
6	"Eulogy for Soldiers Killed in Action"	March 1977	Nile Mansions, Kampala	Uganda Broadcasting Service Archives		Uses biblical allusion, repetition, and ritual lamentation. Blends oral dirge traditions with the narrative of political martyrdom. Evokes communal empathy and moral solidarity.
7	"Farewell Message to the Nation" (Exile Broadcast)	April 1979	Saudi Arabia Radio Interview	BBC Service National Archives (UK)	World and	Tone of nostalgia and justification. Shifts from command to confession, illustrating the transformation of oral authority into defensive self-mythologizing.

Analytical Notes

- 1) The above materials span Amin’s rule from 1971–1979, representing radio, television, and international broadcast media, which together embody the transition of African oral performance into electronic orality.
- 2) Each speech was examined for linguistic patterns (metaphor, repetition, code-switching)
- and performative techniques (gesture, humour, rhythm, invocation) that reveal the aestheticization of power.
- 3) By mapping these data sources, the appendix reinforces methodological transparency and validates the interpretive claims discussed in Sections 5–7 of the paper

Appendix B: Thematic Codes and Oral-Literary Devices

This appendix documents the major thematic codes and oral-literary devices derived from the qualitative discourse and performance analysis of Idi Amin’s speeches (1971 – 1979). Each code corresponds to recurrent rhetorical strategies that combine linguistic form, performative function, and cultural meaning. The table demonstrates how these oral forms were systematically coded and interpreted in relation to the study’s theoretical and analytical frameworks.

Thematic Code	Representative Extract or Example	Dominant Oral-Literary Device	Interpretive Function / Analytical Meaning
Moral Purification	"We are cleaning our house to make it holy again." — <i>Economic War Address, 1972</i>	Metaphor and ritual imagery	Frames expulsion policies as moral cleansing, transforming political violence into an ethical restoration.
Divine Legitimation	"God sent me to bring peace and discipline to our nation." — <i>Coup Broadcast, 1971</i>	Invocation and religious allusion	Establishes charismatic authority through divine sanction, thereby fusing spiritual and political legitimacy.
Humour and Mockery	Laughter during press conferences; ridicule of foreign journalists. — <i>Entebbe Press Briefing, 1976</i>	Irony and satirical performance	Uses laughter to neutralise criticism and invert power; humour becomes a rhetorical weapon of control.

Spectacle and Embodiment	March-past rallies; dramatic gesturing and military display.	Visual and gestural orality	Converts the body into a text of authority; performance turns leadership into a public ritual of dominance.
Populist Brotherhood	“We Ugandans are one drum beating together.” — <i>OAU Address, 1975</i>	Proverb and communal rhythm	Creates an illusion of unity by disguising hierarchy through inclusive orality.
Animal Metaphors	“A lion does not consult a goat before hunting.” — <i>Troop Address, 1976</i>	Folkloric imagery	Naturalises aggression and hierarchy as ecological order; legitimises authoritarian dominance.
Martyrdom and Sacrifice	Eulogies for fallen soldiers; ritual lamentation. — <i>Funeral Speech, 1977</i>	Repetition and dirge rhythm	Converts death into a patriotic offering; links the national struggle to the oral mourning tradition.
Moral Psychology of Obedience	“The snake in the granary must be killed before it poisons our grain.”	Proverb and moral allegory	Reinforces surveillance and obedience through moral imagery; constructs compliance as civic virtue.
Mythic Self-Creation	Self-titles such as “Conqueror of the British Empire.”	Hyperbole and self-mythologising narrative	The project leader, as a folk hero, merges the oral trickster archetype with an autocratic persona.
Digital Afterlife of Orality	Remix clips of Amin’s speeches on TikTok and YouTube.	Ironic re-performance and meme culture	Shows persistence of oral memory in digital media; reframes past spectacle as participatory commentary

Systematic Categorizations and Interpretation

The coding followed a three-stage interpretive process:

- 1) Extraction: Identification of recurring oral features (metaphor, proverb, repetition, humour, gesture) across archival transcripts and recordings.
- 2) Categorisation: Grouping these features into thematic codes reflecting Amin’s rhetorical patterns—moral, populist, mythic, and aesthetic.
- 3) Interpretation: Relating each code to theoretical constructs from Finnegan (2012), Barber (2007), Mbembe (2001), Foucault

(1977), Bourdieu (1991), Tamale (2014), and Nyamnjoh (2021) to reveal how oral forms functioned as mechanisms of charisma, moralisation, and control.

Through this process, the analysis demonstrates that Amin’s orality was not improvisational excess but a structured performance repertoire anchored in African oral epistemologies. The thematic codes thus serve as interpretive keys linking empirical data (Appendix A) to theoretical alignment (Appendix C), ensuring both methodological transparency and analytic coherence.

Appendix C: Analytical Framework Linking Theoretical Lenses, Research Questions, and Thematic Codes

This appendix outlines the analytical matrix used to interpret Idi Amin's speeches. It shows how each thematic code identified in Appendix B was analysed through specific theoretical frameworks and linked directly to the study's research questions (RQs). This matrix clarifies the logic of the analysis and the intellectual pathways through which empirical data were transformed into interpretive findings.

Theoretical Lens / Key Scholar	Analytical Focus / Conceptual Tool	Related Research Question(s)	Corresponding Thematic Codes	Interpretive Contribution / Analytical Outcome
Walter J. Ong (2002) – Theory of Secondary Orality	Orality as participatory, performative, and technologically mediated communication	RQ 1: How does Amin's use of orality function as a performative instrument of power?	Divine Legitimation / Populist Brotherhood / Spectacle and Embodied Performance	Explains how Amin's broadcast speeches reproduced oral participation through rhythm, repetition, and immediacy; demonstrates that radio and television extended the communal qualities of oral performance into state propaganda.
Karin Barber (2007)– Performance Theory	Text as event; meaning generated through social interaction and audience participation	RQ 1 & 2: How does Amin transform oral forms into political performance? How do oral aesthetics authorize authoritarianism?	Animal Metaphors / Humour and Mockery / Martyrdom and Patriotic Sacrifice	Illuminates the performative dimension of Amin's charisma—the speeches as staged spectacles, where participation, laughter, and idiomatic resonance legitimized state violence as a communal ritual.
Ruth Finnegan (2012) – Oral Genres and Moral Function	Indirection, proverb, and moral pedagogy as communicative strategies	RQ 2: In what ways do African oral traditions both authorize and obscure authoritarian practices?	Moral Purification / Moral Psychology of Obedience	Clarifies how oral forms encode morality; shows that Amin's proverbs and parables reframed coercion as ethical renewal, masking authoritarianism as communal virtue.
Achille Mbembe (2001) – Postcolony and Aesthetics of Power	Power as spectacle, excess, and intimacy	RQ 2 & 3: How do orality and power intersect in postcolonial governance?	Spectacle and Embodied Performance / Mythic Self-Creation	Provides a lens to interpret Amin's public appearances and theatrical violence as a continuation of the oral aesthetics of awe and excess—transforming fear into fascination.
Pierre Bourdieu (1991) – Symbolic Capital and Legitimation	Language as power; charisma as linguistic capital	RQ 3: What does Amin's rhetorical style reveal about communication and legitimacy?	Populist Brotherhood / Divine Legitimation	Explains how linguistic style and register convert into authority; reveals that orality operates as symbolic capital in political performance
Sylvia Tamale (2014) – African	Plural moralities, embodiment, and performative ethics	RQ 3: How does moral language intersect with	Humour / Moral Psychology / Martyrdom	Highlights how Amin's rhetoric mobilised patriarchal moral codes

Feminist and Moral Lens		gendered and spiritual dimensions of power?		and spiritualised masculinity to sustain dominance.
Michel Foucault (1977) – Discourse and Power	Speech as a regime of truth and social discipline	RQ 2: How does orality become a mechanism of control?	Moral Purification /Moral Psychology	Reveals that orality, beyond aesthetic performance, functioned as a disciplinary discourse that produced obedience and internalised surveillance.
Francis Nyamnjoh (2021) & G. P. Hendricks (2019) – Digital Orality	Persistence and re-performance of orality in digital media	RQ 3 (extension): How does Amin’s oral legacy survive in contemporary media?	Digital Afterlife of Orality	Demonstrates continuity of Amin’s performative voice in YouTube and TikTok re-circulations, confirming that orality adapts across media and generations

Synthesis and Analytical Value

This integrated framework ensured that each interpretive theme in the analysis was grounded in theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence.

- 1) Ong and Barber explain the performative mechanisms of Amin’s orality.
- 2) Finnegan and Foucault reveal their moralising and disciplinary effects.
- 3) Mbembe and Bourdieu decode the aesthetics and legitimation of power.
- 4) Tamale situates orality within moral and gendered discourse.
- 5) Nyamnjoh and Hendricks extend the analysis to the digital afterlife of Amin’s speeches.

Together, these frameworks operationalise the study’s central claim: that Idi Amin’s orality was not spontaneous charisma but a codified political performance that fused aesthetics, morality, and control—an enduring expression of the oral imagination in African authoritarianism.