

Lone Voices, Shared Stories: Reimagining Singlehood through African Oral Literature and Folklore

Enongene Mirabeau Sone^{1*}

¹ *Walter Sisulu University Mthatha, Eastern Cape Republic of South Africa, Email: enongenes@yahoo.com*

*Corresponding Author: enongenes@yahoo.com

Citation: Sone, E. M. (2026). Lone Voices, Shared Stories: Reimagining Singlehood through African Oral Literature and Folklore, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 11(1), 3234-3244. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v11i1.4681>

Published: March 16, 2026

ABSTRACT

Scholarship on singlehood has largely been shaped by Eurocentric paradigms that foreground urban modernities, nuclear family structures, and Western cultural expectations. Such perspectives have marginalized indigenous African understandings of singleness, which are often embedded in oral traditions and communal storytelling. This paper draws on African oral literature and folklore—including proverbs, praise poetry, myths, and storytelling traditions—to explore how African communities historically conceptualize singlehood as a dynamic and socially meaningful category, rather than merely a deviant or liminal status. Using examples from Xhosa, Shona, and Cameroonian oral traditions, the paper demonstrates how tales of unmarried women and men are often deployed to reinforce communal values, articulate gendered expectations, and negotiate moral agency. At the same time, these narratives also offer spaces of resistance, where single characters embody independence, spiritual authority, or social critique. Through a decolonial methodological lens, this paper interrogates how these oral forms can help us rethink global singles studies by diversifying epistemologies and moving beyond the Global North's cultural geographies of singlehood. Ultimately, the paper argues that African oral narratives offer alternative conceptual vocabularies and relational models for understanding singlehood, not as isolation but as interconnectedness through narrative and memory. This intervention contributes to the pluriversal vision of singles studies by centering African epistemologies and lived cultural forms in contemporary theoretical debates.

Keywords: African oral literature; folklore; singlehood; decolonial epistemologies; proverbs and storytelling; pluriversity.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, singles studies have emerged as a vibrant and interdisciplinary field, drawing from sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, psychology, and gender studies to explore the multiple meanings, experiences, and representations of singlehood (DePaulo, 2006; Lahad, 2017; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). Moving beyond demographic and statistical approaches that once defined singleness merely in relation to marriage rates or household structures, contemporary scholarship has expanded to interrogate the social, cultural, political, and affective dimensions of singlehood. Scholars have examined how singleness intersects with class, race, sexuality, gender, and religion (Budgeon, 2008; Simpson, 2016), as well as how it is shaped by global economic shifts, neoliberal ideologies, and the transformation of intimate life in late modernity (Taylor, 2012; Chambers, 2013). Popular culture and media representations of single people have been scrutinized to understand how they reproduce or resist dominant narratives of intimacy, fulfillment, and family (Byrne & Carr, 2005). These developments have enabled singlehood to emerge as a significant site for understanding identity, belonging, autonomy, and social change in contemporary societies.

Despite this intellectual vibrancy, singles studies has remained largely shaped by Euro-American epistemologies and socio-cultural contexts. As Lahad and Krekula (2020) point out, the theoretical frameworks and empirical studies dominating the field are disproportionately drawn from Northern Europe, North America, and Australia, with very limited attention to the Global South. This Eurocentric orientation has two major consequences. First, it has created a conceptual vocabulary of singlehood that is deeply embedded in Western notions of individualism, autonomy, romantic love, and nuclear family life (Chambers, 2013; Lahad, 2017). Second, it has marginalized or altogether excluded non-Western cultural frameworks that conceptualize personhood and relationality in fundamentally different ways. In African contexts, for example, identity has historically been defined through communal, relational, and spiritual lenses rather than individual autonomy (Mbiti, 1969; Gyekye, 1997). As such, singlehood may carry meanings that are not reducible to the absence of marriage or partnership; rather, it may reflect complex moral, spiritual, and communal positions that are articulated through indigenous epistemologies. Yet, such perspectives remain almost entirely absent from contemporary singles studies, resulting in what Mignolo (2011) terms “epistemic disobedience”—the systematic marginalization of other knowledge systems through the ongoing coloniality of power.

This epistemic gap is particularly striking when viewed against the richness of African oral literature and folklore, which have long served as crucial vehicles for the transmission of knowledge, identity, and moral frameworks across generations (Finnegan, 2012; Barber, 2007; Okpewho, 1992). Oral traditions—including proverbs, folktales, myths, praise poetry, and storytelling—constitute vast archives of African thought and philosophy (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986). These oral forms function not merely as entertainment but as epistemic systems that encode cultural values, social norms, gender relations, spiritual cosmologies, and ethical reasoning (Finnegan, 2012; Noss, 2001). Within this oral archive, unmarried individuals occupy complex and often ambivalent positions. In some narratives, single people are portrayed as incomplete or socially marginal, reflecting communal pressures toward marriage and reproduction. In others, they appear as figures of wisdom, critique, or resistance—herbalists, spiritual leaders, storytellers, or tricksters—whose liminality allows them to challenge established norms and act as moral mirrors for the community (Achebe, 1958; Noss, 2001; Okpewho, 1992).

For instance, in many Xhosa folktales, unmarried female characters often emerge as powerful truth-tellers or spiritual mediators, standing outside patriarchal kinship structures to offer alternative visions of justice and morality. Similarly, in Shona oral narratives, unmarried men are sometimes depicted as tricksters who disrupt social conventions, revealing hypocrisies or testing communal ethics. In Cameroonian storytelling traditions, figures who remain unmarried frequently occupy roles as social critics or moral exemplars, whose outsider status allows them to speak uncomfortable truths that insiders cannot (Finnegan, 2012). These examples underscore that singlehood, within African oral narratives, is not a simple social deficit but a culturally situated position embedded in broader cosmologies of personhood, morality, and community.

The significance of African oral literature and folklore as alternative epistemic sources lies precisely in their ability to provide frameworks for understanding singlehood that differ radically from Western individualist and romantic models. Where Euro-American singles studies have often foregrounded personal choice, autonomy, and lifestyle, African oral narratives foreground relationality, spirituality, communal ethics, and moral ambiguity. Engaging these narratives critically can therefore broaden the conceptual horizons of singles studies, offering new theoretical vocabularies and alternative imaginaries for understanding singlehood as a relational and narrative construct rather than merely a demographic or psychological status.

Against this backdrop, this article aims to decenter Eurocentric perspectives on singlehood by foregrounding African oral literature and folklore as epistemic foundations for singles studies. It draws from oral texts in Xhosa, Shona, and Cameroonian traditions to examine how unmarried individuals are represented and conceptualized in these narratives, what social and moral roles they perform, and how these stories articulate broader cultural logics surrounding singlehood. Through a decolonial theoretical lens (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), the article repositions African oral traditions from the margins to the center of global singles studies, thereby contributing to the pluriversal project of diversifying and deprovincializing knowledge.

This inquiry is guided by an overarching research concern: how can African oral narratives reshape, complicate, or enrich global understandings of singlehood? More specifically, the article investigates how singlehood is conceptualized within selected African oral texts, examining the ways unmarried individuals are represented, categorized, and morally evaluated within communal storytelling traditions. It further explores the social and ethical roles assigned to single figures in these narratives—whether as mediators, critics, moral exemplars, or tricksters—and how these roles relate to broader cultural understandings of personhood and community. Finally, the article examines how the epistemic insights embedded in African oral literature can contribute to diversifying and decolonizing the theoretical foundations of singles studies, offering alternative vocabularies and frameworks that challenge Eurocentric assumptions. By articulating these research concerns in relation to oral literature, the study not only addresses a gap in the singles studies field but also contributes to the larger decolonial project of recognizing indigenous African knowledge systems as legitimate and generative sites of theory-making.

The scope of this article is therefore both theoretical and analytical. Theoretically, it engages critically with dominant Eurocentric paradigms in singles studies and introduces African oral literature as a complementary epistemic archive. Analytically, it conducts close readings of selected oral narratives to identify recurrent motifs, character archetypes, and moral framings associated with singlehood. The contribution is threefold: first, the article expands the conceptual vocabulary of singles studies by introducing African epistemologies; second, it reframes singlehood through communal and narrative lenses, challenging the individualistic assumptions prevalent in Euro-American contexts; and third, it participates in the pluriversalization of knowledge by placing African oral traditions at the center of theoretical debate. In doing so, the article aligns with recent calls to decolonize knowledge systems and to rethink academic fields through more inclusive, context-sensitive, and culturally grounded approaches (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The conceptualization of singlehood has undergone a significant transformation over the past few decades, evolving from narrow demographic understandings to a complex field of interdisciplinary inquiry. However, this body of scholarship remains heavily influenced by Eurocentric paradigms, both in its theoretical framing and geographical focus. Much of the existing research privileges Western notions of individualism, romantic love, and nuclear family structures, thereby marginalizing alternative cultural epistemologies and lived realities outside Euro-American contexts (Budgeon, 2008; Chambers, 2013; Lahad, 2017). This epistemic imbalance is particularly striking when juxtaposed with the rich intellectual resources embedded in African oral literature and folklore, which have historically served as critical sites for articulating concepts of personhood, gender, relationality, and morality (Finnegan, 2012; Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Okpewho, 1992).

A critical engagement with this literature reveals that singles studies has yet to meaningfully integrate non-Western frameworks, particularly those arising from indigenous African knowledge systems. This omission not only limits the analytical scope of the field but also perpetuates a hierarchy of knowledge that privileges Western perspectives as universal while relegating African epistemologies to the periphery (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Meanwhile, decolonial and pluriversal approaches in the humanities have increasingly called for the diversification of epistemic frameworks, urging scholars to recognize multiple ways of knowing and theorizing social identities (Escobar, 2020).

In this light, the literature review is structured into four sections. The first section provides an overview of how singlehood has been theorized within Eurocentric paradigms, highlighting key assumptions that dominate the field. The second section examines decolonial and pluriversal approaches, which advocate for broader epistemological perspectives and challenge the dominance of Western frameworks. The third section turns to African oral literature and folklore, outlining key scholarship on proverbs, storytelling, praise poetry, myths, and gendered narratives, and underscoring their theoretical richness. The final section identifies the major gaps in existing scholarship, specifically the lack of meaningful engagement between singles studies and African oral traditions. By bringing these bodies of literature into dialogue, this review establishes a critical foundation for reimagining singlehood through African epistemic lenses and contributes to the ongoing project of decentering and pluralizing knowledge in global singles studies.

Singles Studies and Eurocentric Paradigms

Scholarship on singlehood has developed primarily within Euro-American academic contexts, emerging at the intersection of sociology, psychology, feminist studies, and cultural studies (Budgeon, 2008; DePaulo, 2006; Lahad, 2017). Early research in singles studies was dominated by demographic and sociological perspectives that conceptualized singleness largely in negative terms, often equating it with the absence of marriage or family. This “deficit model” treated single people as a deviation from the normative marital life course (Byrne & Carr, 2005; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). Feminist scholars later challenged these views by examining single women’s identities and agency, focusing on their resistance to patriarchal expectations of marriage and domesticity (Simpson, 2016; Taylor, 2012).

In contemporary scholarship, singlehood is increasingly studied as a distinct social identity shaped by intersecting axes of power—class, gender, race, sexuality, and geography (Chambers, 2013; Lahad, 2017; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). Scholars highlight how neoliberal ideologies valorize self-sufficiency, choice, and autonomy, framing singleness as a lifestyle choice that reflects modernity and personal freedom (Taylor, 2012; Lahad & Krekula, 2020). In media and cultural representations, single people are often depicted through either celebratory postfeminist narratives of independence or pathologizing discourses of loneliness and incompleteness (Lahad, 2017; Simpson, 2016).

Despite these advancements, the conceptual architecture of singles studies remains heavily Eurocentric. Its theories and empirical studies are largely situated in Western societies, especially Northern Europe, North America, and Australia (Lahad & Krekula, 2020). The field privileges Western notions of individualism, romantic love, and nuclear family structures as the primary reference points for understanding singleness (Chambers, 2013). As Budgeon (2008) notes, cultural expectations of coupledness—what she calls “couple culture”—shape the experiences and identities of single people in ways that are culturally and historically specific. Consequently, the frameworks developed in these contexts do not fully account for non-Western conceptualizations of personhood, family, and relationality, which are often communal, spiritual, and fluid.

This Eurocentric bias has led to the silencing of alternative cultural epistemologies, especially those from the Global South, where singlehood may be understood in ways that diverge significantly from Western individualist frameworks. As Lahad and Krekula (2020) argue, singles studies must confront its geographical and cultural blind spots if it seeks to become a truly global field. This recognition has paved the way for decolonial and pluriversal interventions, which seek to expand the epistemic foundations of the field beyond Euro-American contexts.

Decolonial and Pluriversal Approaches

The decolonial turn in the humanities and social sciences has prompted a fundamental reevaluation of how knowledge is produced, disseminated, and legitimized globally. Thinkers such as Mignolo (2011), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), and Quijano (2000) have demonstrated that modernity is inextricably linked to coloniality, and that Western knowledge systems have historically positioned themselves as universal while marginalizing other epistemologies. In response, decolonial approaches advocate for “epistemic disobedience”—the refusal to accept Western epistemologies as the sole frameworks for interpreting the world (Mignolo, 2011).

Within the study of gender, intimacy, and identity, pluriversal approaches have emphasized the need to recognize multiple, coexisting knowledge systems rather than seeking to replace one hegemonic system with another (Escobar, 2020). A pluriversal approach emphasizes epistemic diversity and contextual grounding, acknowledging the ways in which different societies conceptualize social identities, relationships, and personhood through their own cultural logics (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

In the context of singles studies, adopting a decolonial and pluriversal perspective would entail moving beyond Eurocentric frameworks that center individualism, romantic love, and autonomy, and instead engaging with local epistemologies that may prioritize communal bonds, spirituality, extended kinship systems, or moral roles not reducible to Western categories. This theoretical shift is particularly urgent in African contexts, where personhood has historically been defined through communal relations, ancestry, and spiritual ties rather than autonomous individualism (Mbiti, 1969; Gyekye, 1997). As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argues, decolonizing knowledge requires not simply adding African content to existing frameworks, but rethinking the very foundations of theory from African epistemic locations.

These theoretical interventions provide a crucial framework for this article. By engaging African oral literature and folklore as legitimate epistemic sources, the article seeks to pluralize the field of singles studies and demonstrate how oral traditions offer alternative ways of conceptualizing singlehood.

African Oral Literature and Folklore

African oral literature constitutes one of the richest and most sophisticated bodies of knowledge on the continent. Far from being informal or primitive, oral traditions are complex epistemic systems that encode social values, historical memory, cosmology, gender relations, and moral reasoning (Finnegan, 2012; Okpewho, 1992; Barber, 2007). They encompass a diverse range of genres, including proverbs, folktales, myths, praise poetry, epics, riddles, and storytelling traditions, each of which serves specific cultural and social functions.

Proverbs, for instance, are condensed forms of communal wisdom, used to instruct, caution, moralize, and resolve disputes. As Noss (2001) and Finnegan (2012) demonstrate, proverbs frequently convey gendered expectations and moral values, including those related to marriage, kinship, and personal conduct. Storytelling traditions, meanwhile, provide a narrative space where social roles, identities, and moral dilemmas are dramatized and debated (Achebe, 1958; Okpewho, 1992). Mythological narratives often explain the origins of social practices, including marriage systems and gender relations, while praise poetry functions to celebrate individuals, uphold communal ideals, or critique deviations from them (Barber, 2007).

Within these oral forms, figures who remain unmarried—whether by choice, circumstance, or spiritual calling—often occupy complex roles. In many traditions, unmarried individuals appear as spiritual intermediaries, truth-tellers, tricksters, or moral exemplars, whose liminal status allows them to operate between established social categories (Finnegan, 2012; Noss, 2001). Xhosa folktales often depict unmarried women as spiritually powerful outsiders who challenge patriarchal authority. Shona oral narratives portray unmarried men as cunning tricksters

who expose communal hypocrisies; Cameroonian storytelling traditions use unmarried figures as social critics, embodying moral ambiguity and resistance (Achebe, 1958; Noss, 2001).

Scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) have long argued that African oral literature should not be viewed merely as cultural heritage, but as a theoretical archive capable of generating knowledge. Oral traditions offer alternative conceptions of personhood, community, gender, and moral agency that differ significantly from Western paradigms. Engaging these archives critically allows scholars to rethink contemporary social categories—such as singlehood—from within African epistemological frameworks.

Gaps in Existing Scholarship

Despite the richness of African oral traditions and the growing call for decolonial approaches, there remains a significant gap between singles studies and African cultural frameworks. Singles studies continues to operate largely within Eurocentric paradigms, with limited engagement with African societies beyond demographic statistics or policy analyses. Meanwhile, African oral literature scholarship has focused extensively on issues of tradition, performance, identity, colonialism, and gender (Finnegan, 2012; Okpewho, 1992; Barber, 2007), but has rarely been brought into dialogue with global singles studies.

This disciplinary and epistemic disconnect has resulted in the absence of African perspectives in debates about singlehood, despite African societies having long developed sophisticated ways of conceptualizing unmarried individuals within their oral and communal systems. Very few studies examine singlehood as represented in African oral narratives or analyze how these narratives can theorize singleness differently from Western frameworks. There is thus a pressing need for research that bridges these two domains, drawing on African oral literature not merely as “data” but as theoretical resources that can expand and pluralize the field of singles studies.

This article addresses this gap by bringing African oral literature into critical conversation with singles studies, using a decolonial and pluriversal framework to rethink singlehood from African epistemic locations. In doing so, it contributes to diversifying the intellectual landscape of singles studies and highlights the potential of oral traditions to generate alternative ways of knowing and theorizing identity.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a decolonial, cultural, and folkloristic theoretical lens, combined with a qualitative and interpretive methodological approach, to interrogate how African oral narratives conceptualize singlehood in ways that diverge from dominant Eurocentric frameworks. By drawing on decolonial theory, the study challenges epistemic hierarchies that have marginalized African knowledge systems (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018); through cultural studies, it examines how meaning is produced and contested in oral narratives (Hall, 1997); and through folkloristics, it analyzes the textual, performative, and symbolic dimensions of African oral literature (Finnegan, 2012; Okpewho, 1992). Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative textual analysis of selected folktales, praise poems, and proverbs from Xhosa, Shona, and Cameroonian traditions, chosen for their thematic relevance and cultural significance. This framework enables a rigorous and contextually grounded examination of how unmarried individuals are represented and morally positioned within African oral traditions, while also highlighting the researcher's positionality as an African scholar engaging reflexively with these epistemic archives.

Theoretical Lens: Decolonial Theory, Cultural Studies, and Folkloristics

This study is grounded in a decolonial theoretical framework, enriched by perspectives from cultural studies and folkloristics, to interrogate the epistemic underpinnings of singles studies and foreground African oral literature as a legitimate site of theorization.

Decolonial theory offers a critical lens for challenging the Eurocentric foundations of knowledge production. Central to this framework is the argument that modernity is inextricably linked to coloniality, which continues to shape global hierarchies of knowledge, power, and being (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Quijano, 2000). Eurocentric epistemologies have historically positioned Western categories and concepts—such as individualism, romantic love, and nuclear family structures—as universal, while relegating other knowledge systems to the margins. By engaging with African oral narratives as epistemic resources, this study aligns with Mignolo's (2011) notion of “epistemic disobedience”, which involves delinking from Western epistemic dominance and affirming alternative frameworks of knowing. In this sense, the study resists reducing singlehood to Western individualist terms and instead foregrounds African communal, spiritual, and moral logics embedded in oral traditions.

Complementing this, cultural studies provides tools for analyzing how cultural forms—such as narratives, myths, and proverbs—both reflect and shape social identities, power relations, and moral orders (Hall, 1997; Barker, 2012). Cultural studies emphasizes the interpretive analysis of meaning-making processes within specific

social contexts, making it particularly suitable for understanding how singlehood is represented and negotiated through storytelling practices in African communities. Oral narratives are not passive reflections of social reality but active cultural practices that contribute to the construction, negotiation, and contestation of social categories, including those related to gender, marital status, and personhood.

Finally, folkloristics, the scholarly study of folklore and oral traditions, informs the textual and contextual analysis of the narratives examined in this study. Scholars such as Finnegan (2012), Okpewho (1992), and Noss (2001) have demonstrated that African oral literature is a sophisticated, dynamic, and historically embedded system of communication and knowledge. Folkloristics allows for a nuanced understanding of genre conventions (e.g., proverbs, praise poetry, folktales), performance contexts, symbolic structures, and social functions. It also facilitates comparative analysis across different cultural traditions—here, Xhosa, Shona, and Cameroonian—while remaining attentive to their distinct historical and linguistic specificities.

Taken together, decolonial theory critiques epistemic hierarchies, cultural studies analyzes meaning-making processes, and folkloristics provides the methodological vocabulary for interpreting oral traditions as structured yet dynamic texts. This tripartite theoretical lens enables the study to interrogate how African oral narratives conceptualize singlehood in ways that diverge from Western paradigms, while simultaneously situating these narratives within their specific cultural and historical milieus.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design, focusing on textual analysis of selected African oral narratives—particularly folktales, praise poems, and proverbs—from Xhosa, Shona, and Cameroonian traditions. Qualitative approaches are especially suited to this inquiry because they enable the researcher to engage deeply with the symbolic content, cultural meanings, and narrative structures of oral literature (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interpretive textual analysis enables an examination of how unmarried individuals are represented, the moral and social roles they occupy, and how these representations reflect broader cultural frameworks surrounding singlehood.

Selection of Narratives and Cultural Contexts

The selection of narratives follows purposive sampling to ensure analytical richness and cultural diversity. Three cultural traditions were chosen—Xhosa (South Africa), Shona (Zimbabwe), and Cameroonian—because they represent distinct linguistic, historical, and cultural contexts within sub-Saharan Africa, while also sharing a strong reliance on oral traditions as vehicles for communal knowledge. Within these traditions, narratives were selected according to the following criteria:

- i. **Thematic relevance:** Narratives that explicitly or implicitly feature unmarried individuals or address themes of marriage, relationality, or personhood.
- ii. **Genre diversity:** Inclusion of different oral genres—folktales for their narrative complexity, proverbs for their condensed moral reasoning, and praise poems for their performative and evaluative functions.
- iii. **Cultural significance and circulation:** Narratives that are widely known or frequently performed within their communities, as documented in published collections, ethnographic accounts, and archival materials (e.g., Finnegan, 2012; Noss, 2001).
- iv. **Linguistic and regional representation:** Inclusion of texts from different linguistic regions (Nguni, Bantu, and Francophone/Anglophone Cameroon) to allow for comparative insights while respecting cultural specificity.

Sources for these narratives include archival collections, published anthologies of oral literature, and secondary analyses by folklorists and cultural historians. Where necessary, translated versions are used, with close attention to linguistic nuance, metaphor, and cultural idioms, as translation can sometimes flatten culturally specific meanings (Noss, 2001).

Analytical Approach

The analysis proceeds through close reading and thematic coding, drawing on discourse analysis and folkloristic interpretive methods. Using techniques inspired by NVivo-supported qualitative analysis, narratives are coded for key themes, including the social roles of unmarried figures, moral positioning, gendered expectations, spiritual authority, and forms of resistance or critique. The analysis also attends to narrative structures, character archetypes, and symbolic motifs that inform the portrayal of singlehood. Comparative analysis across cultural contexts highlights both shared themes—such as the role of unmarried individuals as liminal truth-tellers—and culturally specific articulations of singlehood.

Reflexivity: Positioning the Researcher

An important component of this study is reflexivity, particularly the researcher's positioning as an African scholar working within and across African intellectual traditions. As Smith (2012) and Chilisa (2012) have emphasized, research in postcolonial and indigenous contexts must acknowledge the researcher's positionality, including their cultural, epistemological, and political standpoint. The researcher's location within a historically disadvantaged Black South African university shapes both the motivations and commitments of this work. This positionality informs a conscious engagement with African oral traditions not as exoticized objects of analysis but as living, authoritative sources of knowledge.

This reflexive stance aligns with decolonial scholarship, which calls for scholars from the Global South to theorize from their own epistemic locations rather than merely applying imported frameworks (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). It also acknowledges the researcher's role as both an insider and interpreter—sharing cultural proximity with some of the traditions under study (e.g., Southern African contexts), while also approaching others (e.g., Cameroonian narratives) through scholarly mediation. This dual positioning enhances the study's sensitivity to cultural nuance while maintaining critical distance for analytical rigor.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section examines how African oral narratives conceptualize singlehood through rich cultural representations, moral frameworks, and alternative epistemologies. Drawing on folktales, proverbs, and praise poetry from Xhosa, Shona, and Cameroonian traditions, the analysis foregrounds the ways unmarried individuals are depicted not simply as social anomalies but as complex figures embedded within communal, spiritual, and moral systems. Through a close reading of these narratives, the discussion explores four key dimensions: the characterization of unmarried figures and the gendered roles they occupy; the ways in which singlehood functions as a space of social critique and resistance; the role of proverbs in encoding moral expectations and cultural logics; and the alternative vocabularies and relational models that these oral traditions offer. Together, these dimensions reveal how African oral literature provides nuanced, context-specific frameworks that challenge Eurocentric understandings of singlehood and broaden the epistemic foundations of singles studies.

Representations of Singlehood in Oral Narratives

Across Xhosa, Shona, and Cameroonian oral traditions, singlehood emerges as a complex and multilayered category, embodied through a variety of character types—including unmarried women, spiritual figures, tricksters, and moral exemplars—each of whom performs distinctive social and narrative functions. These characters reveal how African oral narratives conceptualize unmarried individuals not merely as social anomalies but as figures embedded within wider moral, spiritual, and communal frameworks.

In many Xhosa folktales, unmarried women often occupy liminal spaces that allow them to act as mediators between the community and spiritual realms. For example, in one well-known Xhosa tale, an unmarried young woman—referred to as *intombi engatshatanga*—is chosen by ancestral spirits to reveal a hidden injustice within her village (Finnegan, 2012). Her unmarried status grants her both vulnerability and spiritual receptivity, positioning her outside male-controlled kinship structures while simultaneously enabling her to channel ancestral voices. Such figures parallel the “wise outsider” archetype found in various Bantu oral traditions, where unmarried women function as moral arbiters or custodians of truth (Noss, 2001; Okpewho, 1992).

Similarly, Shona folktales often depict unmarried men as tricksters or liminal wanderers who challenge communal conventions through wit, cunning, or satire. One narrative features a single male trickster who repeatedly exposes the hypocrisy of married men who pretend to be virtuous in public but act immorally in private. Through clever disguises and riddling speech, he forces the community to confront its moral inconsistencies (Hodza & Fortune, 1979). These figures align with what Okpewho (1992) describes as the “critical outsider” role in African oral traditions: unmarried individuals who, precisely because they are outside kinship structures, can critique communal norms without being fully implicated in them.

In Cameroonian storytelling traditions, unmarried individuals often appear as spiritual figures or moral exemplars. In tales collected among the Bamiléké and Duala peoples, unmarried women are sometimes represented as *nganga* (healers) or *mabanjob* (wise women) whose celibate status is interpreted as a form of spiritual dedication rather than social failure (Nkwi, 1976; Noss, 2001). Unmarried men, on the other hand, may serve as heroic wanderers or ascetics who resist the temptations of worldly power in pursuit of higher knowledge. These narratives illustrate how singlehood is embedded within moral cosmologies and spiritual hierarchies, functioning as both a social position and a narrative device.

Importantly, gendered expectations and communal roles are deeply ingrained in these portrayals. While unmarried women are often spiritually empowered, they may simultaneously be depicted as vulnerable to social scrutiny or supernatural threat if they transgress communal norms (Finnegan, 2012). Unmarried men, particularly tricksters, may enjoy narrative agency but are often portrayed as socially transient figures whose critique is tolerated but not fully absorbed into communal structures (Okpewho, 1992). These representations reveal that African oral narratives conceptualize singlehood as a relational status—defined through interactions with community, morality, and spirituality—rather than simply the absence of marriage.

Singlehood as Social Critique and Resistance

A striking feature of these narratives is the way singlehood functions as a narrative space for social critique and resistance. In contexts where marriage is a central institution organizing gender relations, inheritance, and community belonging, unmarried individuals can serve as figures who destabilize normative expectations. Their liminality allows them to articulate alternative moral visions or expose communal contradictions.

In a Xhosa tale about a widowed woman who refuses remarriage, her continued single status becomes a platform for critiquing the exploitative practices of male elders who seek to control her property. Her defiance, narrated through song and parable, eventually leads the community to revise its inheritance customs, recognizing her moral authority (Finnegan, 2012). In this narrative, singlehood is not merely tolerated but becomes a source of transformative agency, challenging gendered power relations.

Shona trickster tales often use unmarried male figures to mock societal pretensions. One recurring story involves a single man who outwits village leaders during public debates by using metaphoric language and riddles. His unmarried status frees him from obligations to particular clans or wives, enabling him to act as an impartial critic (Hodza & Fortune, 1979). This figure resonates with what Barber (2007) describes as the “*narrative dissenter*”—a character who uses performance to question dominant ideologies.

In Cameroon, narratives about unmarried female healers frequently critique patriarchal attempts to control women’s sexuality and spiritual power. For instance, among the Bakweri, tales of celibate female herbalists emphasize their resistance to forced marriages and their ability to wield spiritual authority outside male-dominated kinship structures (Nkwi, 1976). Such narratives implicitly challenge the conflation of womanhood with marital status, offering alternative identities rooted in spiritual and communal roles rather than romantic partnerships.

These examples reveal that singlehood in African oral narratives is often a position from which dominant social arrangements can be critiqued. Unmarried figures serve as agents of moral clarity, satire, resistance, or reform, thereby destabilizing normative narratives about gender, marriage, and authority.

Proverbs and Moral Frameworks

African proverbs are central to understanding how communities encode moral expectations surrounding singlehood. Proverbs are concise, memorable, and authoritative forms of discourse that express cultural logics, ethical positions, and social norms (Finnegan, 2012; Noss, 2001).

Among the Xhosa, proverbs such as “*Indoda ayikhathezwana kukungena endlini yomfazzi*” (“A man does not suffer by entering a woman’s house”) reflect expectations that men should eventually marry, but also acknowledge situations where gender roles may be reversed—indicating a pragmatic recognition of diverse relational arrangements. Similarly, “*Intombi ayibhlali idla yodwa*” (“A maiden does not eat alone”) underscores communal expectations of female sociability and connectedness, while also implying that prolonged singleness disrupts communal rhythms (Finnegan, 2012).

In Shona culture, proverbs such as “*Mukadzji asina murume ibwe risina mvura*” (“A woman without a husband is like a dry stone”) reveal social attitudes that associate female singleness with unfulfilled potential, while “*Murume asina mukadzji imbuka*” (“A man without a wife is like a beast”) frames male singleness as socially incomplete or uncivilized (Hodza & Fortune, 1979). Yet, these proverbs are often deployed contextually and may be subverted in performance. For example, storytellers might use them ironically to critique individuals who hide immoral behavior behind the veneer of marriage, thereby turning the proverb into a tool of moral inversion.

In Cameroonian contexts, proverbs related to unmarried individuals often emphasize spiritual or moral responsibility rather than marital status per se. Among the Bamileké, sayings such as “*Ntcha’a me ntoh, me ntoh a si ntcha’a*” (“The one who walks alone walks with the ancestors”) frame singleness as potentially spiritually charged, associating solitary individuals with ancestral guidance (Nkwi, 1976). Such proverbs encode a non-individualistic moral framework, in which singlehood is situated within networks of ancestral and communal relations.

Together, these proverbs function as moral frameworks that articulate community expectations while allowing for ambiguity, irony, and resistance. They demonstrate that African communities possess dense moral vocabularies

for conceptualizing singlehood—vocabularies that are relational, spiritual, and pragmatic, rather than individualistic or romantic.

Alternative Vocabularies and Relational Models

Perhaps the most significant insight from this analysis is that African oral traditions offer alternative vocabularies and relational models for conceptualizing singlehood that diverge fundamentally from Eurocentric paradigms. Whereas Western singles studies often frame singleness in terms of individual autonomy, lifestyle choice, or delay of marriage, African oral narratives embed singlehood within communal, spiritual, and moral economies.

Unmarried individuals in these narratives are not primarily defined by the absence of marital ties but by the roles they play within communal systems—as spiritual mediators, critics, healers, or liminal figures. This suggests that singlehood in these contexts is not an individual status but a relational position, negotiated through storytelling, performance, and proverb use. These narratives provide epistemic alternatives to Western concepts, foregrounding interconnectedness over autonomy, communal responsibility over personal fulfillment, and moral-spiritual roles over romantic ones.

Moreover, these alternative models reveal a dynamic interplay between normativity and resistance. On the one hand, oral traditions reflect communal expectations that valorize marriage and reproduction. On the other hand, they offer narrative spaces where unmarried figures critique, reinterpret, or transcend these expectations. This duality aligns with cultural studies perspectives on how cultural texts simultaneously reproduce and contest social ideologies (Hall, 1997; Barber, 2007).

In re-centering African oral literature as a site of theoretical reflection, this analysis contributes to decolonizing singles studies by demonstrating that African societies have long articulated complex, context-specific understandings of singlehood that are theoretically generative, rather than merely descriptive. These alternative vocabularies expand the conceptual field, allowing for pluriversal approaches to singlehood that recognize multiple coexisting epistemologies (Escobar, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

Implications for Singles Studies

The analysis of African oral literature—through folktales, praise poetry, and proverbs from Xhosa, Shona, and Cameroonian traditions—reveals important theoretical, methodological, and epistemic implications for the field of singles studies. At its core, this intervention demonstrates that African oral narratives decenter Eurocentric discourses of singlehood by foregrounding alternative cultural logics that challenge prevailing assumptions about individuality, autonomy, romantic fulfillment, and marital normativity. In dominant Euro-American scholarship, singlehood is typically framed in relation to delayed marriage, lifestyle choice, personal autonomy, or neoliberal self-fashioning (Budgeon, 2008; Lahad, 2017; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). African oral traditions, by contrast, situate singlehood within communal, spiritual, and moral economies, viewing unmarried individuals as relationally embedded actors—spiritual mediators, moral critics, tricksters, or cultural figures—rather than isolated subjects. This epistemic shift expands the conceptual vocabulary of singles studies, offering new categories, metaphors, and relational models for theorizing singleness beyond the Western paradigm.

By incorporating African oral literature into the conversation, singles studies is invited to rethink its theoretical foundations and move toward pluriversal approaches that recognize multiple, coexisting epistemologies (Escobar, 2020; Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Rather than treating Western frameworks as universal and others as supplementary, a pluriversal perspective treats African oral traditions as theoretical archives in their own right—capable of generating concepts, frameworks, and interpretive lenses that are equally legitimate and productive. For example, the Shona trickster figure who uses his unmarried status to critique social hypocrisy, and the Cameroonian celibate healer who channels ancestral wisdom, are not merely cultural curiosities; they represent alternative theoretical models of personhood, relationality, and social critique that can broaden the horizons of global singles studies. This move towards pluriversality not only enriches the field but also decolonizes its epistemic architecture, making room for knowledge systems that have long been marginalized.

The implications of this shift are significant for gender, identity, and cultural studies. African oral narratives demonstrate that gendered experiences of singlehood are deeply embedded in communal and spiritual frameworks, where unmarried women may simultaneously be marginalized and spiritually empowered, and unmarried men may serve as liminal critics rather than simply deviant bachelors. Such portrayals destabilize the binary of empowerment versus marginalization often found in Western feminist readings of singlehood, offering instead more ambivalent, fluid, and context-dependent understandings (Finnegan, 2012; Okpewho, 1992). Furthermore, oral traditions highlight that singlehood intersects with broader questions of identity formation, moral authority, and social critique—domains that are central to cultural studies. By examining how communities use stories, performance,

and proverbs to negotiate singlehood, scholars can gain deeper insight into how social identities are constructed, contested, and transformed outside Euro-American contexts.

Methodologically, incorporating African oral literature encourages singles studies to diversify its sources of evidence beyond surveys, interviews, and media texts, and to take seriously orality, performance, and indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate archives of social theory. This approach also highlights the significance of linguistic nuance, cultural context, and performance settings in understanding how singleness is constructed across different societies. By engaging these archives on their own terms, scholars can avoid merely “adding” African examples to existing frameworks and instead participate in genuine epistemic dialogue.

In sum, the engagement with African oral traditions reshapes the field of singles studies in three interrelated ways: it decenters Eurocentric narratives by introducing alternative conceptual frameworks; it contributes to pluriversal scholarship by recognizing African oral literature as a site of theory-making; and it enriches gender, identity, and cultural studies by revealing complex, relational, and spiritual dimensions of singlehood often overlooked in Western scholarship. This pluriversal reorientation not only deepens the intellectual maturity of singles studies but also aligns the field with broader global efforts to decolonize knowledge and embrace epistemic diversity.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that African oral literature and folklore provide a rich, alternative epistemic archive for rethinking singlehood in ways that disrupt the Eurocentric narratives dominant in singles studies. Through the analysis of folktales, proverbs, and praise poetry from Xhosa, Shona, and Cameroonian traditions, the paper has shown that unmarried individuals are represented not as social anomalies but as multifaceted figures—spiritual mediators, moral critics, tricksters, and liminal wanderers—whose roles are deeply embedded in communal, spiritual, and moral economies. These representations underscore that singlehood in African contexts is relational, spiritual, and socially functional, offering a conceptual vocabulary that differs radically from the Western emphasis on autonomy, lifestyle, and delayed marriage.

The findings highlight the urgent need to integrate African oral traditions into global singles studies as theoretical resources rather than mere cultural illustrations. Doing so not only expands the field’s epistemic horizons but also contributes to the broader project of decolonizing knowledge by affirming the legitimacy of African epistemologies in shaping global scholarship. Oral traditions, long marginalized as folklore or cultural heritage, emerge here as sites of theory-making that offer pluriversal frameworks for understanding identity, relationality, and social critique.

Future research should extend this work through field-based ethnographic engagement with communities where oral traditions remain vibrant, enabling deeper insights into the contemporary meanings of singlehood as narrated in lived practice. Comparative studies across African regions—and between African and other non-Western oral traditions—could further enrich theoretical conversations. Interdisciplinary collaborations with anthropology, gender studies, performance studies, and philosophy could also open new avenues for analysis. Importantly, a gendered lens remains crucial, as women’s and men’s experiences of singlehood in oral narratives often diverge, intersecting with questions of power, spirituality, and social authority.

Ultimately, this study affirms the scholarly and cultural significance of African oral literature in reshaping the intellectual terrain of singles studies. By centering African voices and traditions, the paper demonstrates that literature is not confined to the written page but thrives in oral, performative, and communal spaces where identities are negotiated and cultural values transmitted. Integrating these perspectives ensures that singles studies evolves into a truly global and pluriversal field, responsive to diverse cultural logics and open to the multiple ways in which communities around the world conceptualize singleness, personhood, and belonging. In this way, African oral traditions do not merely supplement existing frameworks; they transform and expand the very foundations of the discipline.

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