

**Incantation, Prayer, and Sacred Speech: A Literary Exploration of Ritual Language In
Easter Liturgies and African Sacrificial Ceremonies**

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Abstract

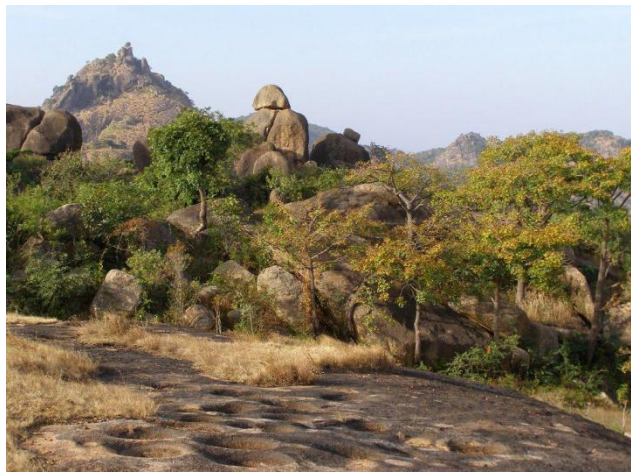
This study interrogates the performative, symbolic, and ontological dimensions of sacred speech within Roman Catholic Easter liturgy and African indigenous sacrificial traditions, with particular attention to incantatory expressions associated with Chip oral traditions. Drawing on speech act theory, ritual studies, and African oral poetics, the paper argues that both liturgical prayer and African incantation function as efficacious verbal acts that mediate between the human and the divine. This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design, grounded in textual and discourse analysis. The primary theoretical lens for this study is Speech Act Theory, propounded by J. L. Austin and later developed by John Searle. The theory posits that language is not only used to communicate information but also to perform actions. Through a comparative literary analysis of Eucharistic texts, Easter chants, and African ritual utterances, the study demonstrates that sacred speech in both traditions transcends representational language, operating instead as a transformative force that produces spiritual realities. The convergence between these traditions underscores the universality of ritual language as a medium of metaphysical engagement and cultural identity.

Keywords: Incantation, liturgies, sacrificial, ceremonies

Introduction

Language occupies a foundational role in religious ritual across cultures. It is not merely a medium of communication but a vehicle of transformation, capable of mediating between the physical and metaphysical realms. Within Roman Catholicism, the Easter liturgy represents the apex of sacred expression, where carefully structured prayers, chants, and scriptural recitations re-enact the death and resurrection of Christ. In African indigenous traditions, particularly within Miship language oral culture, incantations and ritual speech perform parallel functions, invoking spiritual forces and sustaining cosmological balance. This paper explores the intersection between these traditions, arguing that both employ sacred speech as a performative act that produces spiritual realities. By situating these practices within literary and theoretical frameworks, the study demonstrates that ritual language functions as both literature and action.

Brief History of the Miship People of Chip District, Pankshin LGA



The Miship people (also known as Mhiship or Chip) are an ethnic group located in the southern part of Pankshin Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. Their homeland, commonly referred to as Chip District, comprises several communities including Jibam, Kwala, Kapil, Mugulum, and Dyerok. The origin of the Miship people is largely preserved through oral traditions, which present multiple migration narratives. One widely accepted tradition traces their ancestry to the Chad Basin and the wider Sudan region, from where they migrated alongside other Plateau ethnic groups such as the Ngas, Tarok, and Mupun. It is believed that these groups moved through Kanem-Borno between the 12th and 18th centuries before finally settling in their present location in Plateau State. Another tradition suggests that different Miship clans migrated at different times: The Jibam (Jibaam) clan traces its origin to the Chad Basin. The Longmaar

clan is sometimes regarded as indigenous or linked to nearby Plateau groups such as Mwaghavul.

The present-day Miship (Chip) land is organized under a centralized traditional system headed by a paramount ruler known as the Ndaalong Miship, whose seat is at Kwala, the cultural headquarters of the people. Historically, the foundation of the Chip chiefdom is associated with an Ngas-origin figure named Dawar, whose descendants established early rulership structures in the area. During the colonial period, the British administration formalized the identity “Chip” as an administrative designation, although the people refer to themselves as Miship (Mhiship).

The Miship people speak the Miship language, an Afro-Asiatic (West Chadic) language closely related to Ngas and Mwaghavul. The language has two main dialectal groupings Longmaar and Jibaam (Jibam) These dialects reflect historical migration patterns and internal diversity within the group. Traditionally, the Miship people are agrarian, with farming as their primary occupation. Major crops include, Yam, Rice, Millet, Guinea corn, Beans. They also engage in hunting, blacksmithing, and weaving as secondary economic activities.

Before the spread of Christianity, the Miship practiced African Traditional Religion, which involved: Ancestor veneration, sacrificial rituals, divination practices and circumcision and initiation. Some of their deities includes: kuum pal, Khirim, Kohho, etc. Today, Christianity is dominant, though elements of traditional belief systems persist in cultural practices. One of their major cultural festivals is the Vaiko festival, a harvest celebration featuring dance, wrestling, and communal rituals.

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design, grounded in textual and discourse analysis. The research is situated within the interdisciplinary fields of linguistics, religious studies, and African oral traditions. It specifically employs Speech Act Theory as a theoretical framework to examine how language functions performatively within both Christian liturgical expressions and African traditional incantations. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on meaning-making, symbolic expressions, and the functional use of language in ritual contexts rather than on quantifiable data.

The data for this study are derived from two primary sources, these are:

1. Christian Liturgical Texts:

The Christian data consist of selected prayers and liturgical expressions drawn from the *Catholic Sunday Missal*, which serves as an authoritative text for Catholic worship and doctrinal practice. These texts are widely recognized and used in formal church services, particularly during significant liturgical seasons such as Easter.

2. African Traditional Incantations (Primary Oral Source):

The traditional data consist of incantatory utterances obtained from oral tradition. These incantations were transmitted through the researcher's grandfather, Dakulak Dakirim Yaryin, a respected traditional priest from Chip community in Plateau State, Nigeria.

The use of this source is justified within the framework of African oral literature, where knowledge is preserved and transmitted through generational memory and performance. The incantations reflect authentic indigenous religious practices and worldview. Data were collected through textual extraction from the *Catholic Sunday Missal*, focusing on prayer forms that exhibit performative and ritualistic characteristics and Oral documentation, where the researcher relied on preserved knowledge of traditional incantations as transmitted by Dakulak Dakirim Yaryin. Given the oral nature of African traditional religion, this method aligns with established ethnographic practices that recognize oral testimony as valid primary data (Finnegan, 2012).

The study employs Speech Act Theory, as developed by J. L. Austin (1962) and further refined by John Searle (1969), as its analytical framework.

This theory posits that language is not merely descriptive but performative, meaning that utterances can perform actions. The analysis focuses on three levels: the Locutionary acts (the literal meaning of the utterance), the Illocutionary acts (the intended function, such as blessing, commanding, invoking), and the Perlocutionary acts (the effect on the audience or participants)

This framework is particularly relevant for analyzing both liturgical prayers and traditional incantations, as both rely heavily on the performative power of language to invoke spiritual realities, enforce authority, and produce ritual outcomes.

The combination of textual and oral data is methodologically justified because the study seeks to establish a comparative understanding of sacred speech across different cultural systems. While Christian liturgy relies on codified texts, African traditional religion is predominantly oral.

By integrating both sources, the study provides a more holistic understanding of how language functions as ritual action across religious traditions.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualizing Language as Action

The study of language has evolved beyond viewing it as a mere tool for communication to recognizing it as a form of action. This shift is largely attributed to J. L. Austin, whose seminal work *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) introduced the concept of performativity in language. Austin argues that utterances do not simply describe reality but can actively bring about states of affairs. Thus, statements such as blessings, prayers, or declarations function as actions in themselves.

Building on this foundation, John Searle (1969) systematized Speech Act Theory by categorizing utterances into assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. These categories provide a robust framework for analyzing how language operates within ritual contexts, where utterances serve to command, invoke, transform, or affirm.

This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant to both Christian liturgical language and African traditional incantations, as both systems are grounded in the assumption that words possess intrinsic power when uttered within appropriate ritual contexts.

Ritual language has been widely studied as a specialized form of communication characterized by formality, repetition, symbolism, and performative intent. Stanley Tambiah (1979) argues that ritual language is inherently performative, functioning not merely to communicate but to effect change in both social and spiritual domains. According to Tambiah, the efficacy of ritual utterances derives from shared cultural beliefs and the recognized authority of the speaker.

Similarly, Victor Turner (1969) emphasizes that ritual operates as a dynamic process through which symbols and language mediate between the physical and metaphysical realms. Within this framework, language becomes a transformative medium, capable of invoking divine presence, restructuring social relationships, and producing existential change.

In Christian liturgy, ritual language is highly structured and codified, often rooted in centuries of theological tradition. Conversely, African traditional incantations are more fluid and adaptive, yet equally powerful, drawing authority from ancestral lineage, communal memory, and performative context.

African oral literature provides a critical framework for understanding incantation as a form of sacred speech. Ruth Finnegan (2012) observes that oral traditions in Africa are deeply embedded in social, political, and religious life, functioning not merely as artistic expressions but as mechanisms for preserving and transmitting knowledge. John Mbiti (1969) further asserts that African traditional religions are fundamentally oral and performative, with knowledge transmitted across generations through speech. In this cosmology, words are believed to carry vital force, capable of influencing both visible and invisible realities. Incantations, therefore, are not merely symbolic but operative, intended to produce tangible outcomes such as healing, protection, blessing, or spiritual mediation. Their effectiveness depends on correct performance, contextual appropriateness, and the authority of the speaker.

Sacred speech refers to ritualized language believed to possess spiritual efficacy, including prayers, chants, invocations, and incantations. Across religious traditions, such language transcends ordinary communication, functioning as a medium of interaction between the human and the supernatural. In African traditional religion, prayer and incantation constitute core mechanisms of spiritual mediation. Lawrence-Hart and Tamunoyalla describe prayer as a

“practice of religious communication... to appease a super force,” emphasizing that its effectiveness depends on ritual performance and contextual appropriateness. This aligns with broader anthropological perspectives that view ritual speech as a channel between the human and spiritual realms.

Adedeji, Olulowo, and Ogundeji further argue that sacred speech in African societies extends beyond ritual performance to influence social cohesion, moral systems, and economic life. Their functionalist perspective underscores the role of incantation as both a spiritual and socio-cultural instrument, reinforcing communal identity and continuity.

From a linguistic standpoint, ritual utterances are characterized by features such as repetition, rhythm, invocation, and emotive expression, all of which enhance their performative potency (Adeyemi). These features situate incantation within the domain of oral poetics, where language is deliberately structured to achieve both aesthetic and functional outcomes.

In Christian traditions, particularly within Roman Catholicism, sacred speech is institutionalized through liturgy. The *Catholic Sunday Missal* provides a structured framework for ritual language, especially during significant liturgical seasons such as Easter. One notable example is the Exsultet, an Easter proclamation that transforms theological narrative into a lived ritual experience. Rather than merely recounting the resurrection, it enacts it through performative language, demonstrating that liturgical utterances function as events rather than descriptions.

Similarly, Eucharistic prayers and consecration formulas operate as declarative speech acts, believed to effect real spiritual transformation. This reinforces the idea that Christian liturgy, like African incantation, is grounded in the principle that language possesses ontological significance.

Comparative studies reveal that ritual language across religious traditions often converges around themes of sacrifice, invocation, and transformation. For instance, in broader liturgical traditions such as the *Yasna*, the concept of worship is intrinsically linked to sacrifice, highlighting the interdependence of speech and ritual action. In African-Christian syncretic contexts, practices such as Isiguqo prayer demonstrate how indigenous forms of sacred speech

are integrated into Christian worship. These practices often involve chant, movement, and communal participation, illustrating a continuity between traditional incantatory forms and Christian liturgical structures. Such convergence suggests a shared epistemological foundation in which language is viewed as a transformative force, capable of mediating between realms and constructing religious experience.

Despite extensive scholarship on ritual language and sacred speech, there remains a significant gap in studies that comparatively analyze Christian liturgical texts and African traditional incantations within a unified theoretical framework. Most existing research tends to examine Western liturgical traditions in isolation, or African oral practices independently

This study addresses this gap by offering a comparative, theory-driven analysis, demonstrating how Speech Act Theory can serve as a unifying framework for understanding sacred language across diverse cultural and religious contexts.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

A Literary Exploration of Ritual Language in Easter Liturgies and African Sacrificial Ceremonies

Ritual language, whether expressed through liturgical chants or indigenous incantations, occupies a central position in both Christian and African religious traditions. Its significance extends beyond mere communication to encompass performative, symbolic, and transformative functions. This section, therefore, offers a literary analysis of ritual language in Easter liturgies and African (Miship) sacrificial ceremonies, with particular emphasis on how language operates simultaneously as text and action. The incantations attributed to Dakulak Dakirim Yaryin (1996) of Chip, Plateau State, Nigeria, are examined through the lens of Speech Act Theory in order to uncover their functional and performative dimensions.

The Christian prayer of invocation and its indigenous parallel may be presented as follows:

‘Indihin sim khin nan, ndha mu, muji khi jep mu oh’ (Yaryin)

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Catholic Sunday Missal).

At the locutionary level, this utterance appears as a declarative statement invoking the Trinity within Christian doctrine. However, at the illocutionary level, it functions as a performative act that initiates sacred engagement. Rather than merely referencing the Trinity, it establishes a ritual boundary, marking the transition from ordinary discourse to sacred interaction.

Consequently, the perlocutionary effect of the utterance lies in its capacity to generate reverence, unity, and spiritual readiness among participants. It also affirms ecclesiastical authority while signaling the commencement of divine encounter. From a Speech Act perspective, this aligns with J. L. Austin’s notion of performative utterances, in which the act of speaking constitutes the action itself. The effectiveness of the utterance is thus contingent upon priestly authority and institutional validation. A comparable dynamic is evident in the Miship incantation:

“Oh sar oh, wan oh, puus kat oh... kam fiyar, kam muut oh...” (Yaryin, 1996)

“We call, we call, we call again; let the path open, let the way remain.”

Here, repetition, rhythm, and phonological intensity constitute the dominant stylistic features. The iterative “oh” functions not only as a linguistic element but also as a paralinguistic device that amplifies urgency and spiritual focus. More specifically, the utterance performs a directive and invocative function, seeking the removal of obstacles while simultaneously intensifying ritual efficacy.

Moreover, the repetitive structure induces a trance-like concentration and fosters collective synchronization among participants. This heightened emotional engagement reinforces belief in the immediacy of spiritual response. Theoretically, this corresponds to what may be described as phonological performativity, where sound itself carries ritual power independent of semantic content. Thus, the effectiveness of ritual language is shown to derive not only from meaning but also from acoustic and rhythmic qualities.

A defining feature of ritual language in both traditions is its inherently performative nature. As J. L. Austin asserts, “to say something is to do something” (Austin 12). This principle is particularly evident in the Eucharistic liturgy, where the priest’s role assumes a symbolic and performative dimension. Although the Mass is not theatrical, it functions as a sacramental representation of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection.

This is illustrated in the liturgical declaration:

“And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it... ‘This is my body... This cup is the new covenant in my blood’” (Luke 22:19–20).

In this context, the utterance does not merely describe a past event; rather, it enacts it within the liturgical present. Accordingly, the language operates not only symbolically but ontologically, effecting a transformation within the ritual moment.

Similarly, Miship sacrificial ceremonies exhibit comparable performative structures. The ritual specialist (Long Kuum) enters the shrine with consecrated offerings and invokes the spirits:

“Spirits of the land, arise and receive the gift of your children... Let this offering speak where we cannot and bless us all.” (Yaryin)

Here, the utterance functions as an act of mediation between the human and spiritual realms. The accompanying ritual actions such as the slaughtering of animals and the offering of food is to reinforce the performative force of the spoken words. In line with Austin’s framework, the efficacy of such utterances depends on context, authority, and intentionality.

Furthermore, a notable convergence emerges in the symbolic use of sacrificial elements. Both traditions employ blood and food substances (bread or grain) as mediatory symbols, thereby reinforcing the connection between language, ritual action, and spiritual transformation.

This convergence is further exemplified in the prayer of consecration:

“Take, eat; this is my body... This is my blood of the new covenant... for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:27–28).

Although structurally declarative, the utterance performs a transformative function within Catholic theology, enacting the doctrine of transubstantiation. Its perlocutionary effect is evident in the reverence and spiritual consciousness it evokes among believers. Consequently, this represents one of the most compelling instances of language functioning as action.

From a literary perspective, ritual language in both traditions exhibits pronounced poetic qualities. As Ruth Finnegan observes, oral religious expressions are “highly stylized, rhythmic, and patterned” (Finnegan 52). This is evident in the Easter acclamation:

“Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” (Misal)

The triadic structure enhances both memorability and theological emphasis. Similarly, Miship incantations employ repetition and parallelism:

“mu yong gun, shin mu yong gun; deh ngun gun ep yar nmundi. Deh nkumpiya mun oh”
(Yaryin)

In this instance, rhythmic patterning and structural balance amplify the incantation’s spiritual potency. Thus, ritual language in both contexts can be situated within the broader framework of oral poetry, where aesthetic form and functional purpose are inseparable.

In addition to their poetic features, these utterances are deeply symbolic. In Christian liturgy, imagery of blood, sacrifice, and redemption dominates the Easter narrative, as reflected in Hebrews 9:22:

“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”

Here, blood signifies covenant and redemption. Similarly, in Miship ritual practice, blood functions as a medium of communication with the spiritual realm, symbolizing appeasement and purification. This parallel underscores what Victor Turner describes as the “multivocality of

symbols,” whereby a single symbol carries multiple layers of meaning (Turner 50).

Consequently, both traditions employ symbolic language as a mediating force between the human and the divine.

Ritual language also plays a crucial role in constructing and reinforcing communal identity. In Easter liturgy, congregational responses such as:

“Amen... Peace be with you... Alleluia”

serve as collective affirmations of faith, transforming individual belief into shared religious experience.

Likewise, Miship incantations often involve communal participation:

“Stand with us, ancestors... we are one voice, one people, one call.” (Yaryin)

Such expressions reinforce social cohesion and cultural continuity. As John Mbiti aptly notes, African religion is fundamentally communal rather than individualistic (Mbiti 108). Therefore, ritual language functions not only as spiritual communication but also as a mechanism for sustaining collective identity.

The effectiveness of ritual language in both traditions is contingent upon authorized speakers. In Roman Catholic practice, only an ordained priest can validly pronounce the words of consecration, fulfilling what Austin terms the “felicity conditions” (Austin 15). Similarly, in Miship tradition, ritual authority resides in elders or specialists whose legitimacy derives from cultural knowledge and spiritual standing. As Isidore Okpewho observes, the power of oral ritual discourse is inseparable from the authority of its performer (Okpewho 113).

Finally, ritual language functions to transform both time and space. In the Eucharistic context, the directive “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19) collapses temporal boundaries, rendering past events present through anamnesis. In a comparable manner, Miship incantations invoke ancestral presence, thereby transforming ritual space into a site of interaction between the living and the dead.

Comparative Analysis of Chants and Incantations in Liturgical and African (Miship) Ritual Traditions

Chants and incantations occupy a central position in both Roman Catholic liturgical practice and African indigenous religious traditions, particularly among the Miship people of Plateau State. Although these forms of sacred expression emerge from distinct theological and cultural systems, they converge on a fundamental premise: that language possesses performative efficacy. This section, therefore, undertakes a comparative analysis of Easter liturgical chants and Miship incantations, with specific attention to their structure, function, symbolism, performance, and authority.

To begin with, liturgical chants in Christian worship are highly structured and often musical forms of prayer embedded within formal ecclesiastical frameworks. Notable examples include the *Exsultet*, *Kyrie*, and *Alleluia*, all of which follow prescribed liturgical patterns (Roman Missal). These chants are typically communal and regulated by doctrinal conventions. In contrast, Miship incantations are orally delivered ritual utterances intended to invoke spiritual forces. They are usually performed by ritual specialists and are often accompanied by sacrifices, libations, or healing rites. As John S. Mbiti observes, African religious expression is deeply integrated into the lived experience and worldview of the community.

A significant point of convergence between these traditions lies in their linguistic structure. Liturgical chants are characterized by repetition, rhythm, and formalized syntax, as exemplified in the Easter proclamation:

“Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again” (Roman Missal).

This triadic structure enhances both memorability and doctrinal emphasis. Similarly, Miship incantations employ parallelism, repetition, and invocation, as illustrated in the expression:

“Spirits arise, spirits hear,
Open the path, make it clear.”

Such structural affinities reinforce Ruth Finnegan's assertion that oral traditions across cultures utilize patterned language to enhance both retention and ritual potency. Thus, despite cultural divergence, both forms rely on poetic structuring to achieve functional effectiveness.

In terms of function, however, subtle distinctions emerge. Within Christian liturgy, chants primarily serve to praise God, re-enact sacred history, and facilitate communal worship. For instance, the *Exsultet* proclaims the resurrection while inviting cosmic participation: "Rejoice, heavenly powers!" (Roman Missal). By contrast, Miship incantations are more directly instrumental, functioning to invoke ancestral spirits, sanctify sacrificial acts, and provide protection for individuals or communities. As Isidore Okpewho notes, such utterances derive meaning from their performative context rather than from abstract interpretation alone.

Furthermore, both traditions employ dense symbolic systems, though their theological interpretations differ. In Christian liturgy, symbols such as blood, light, and the lamb signify redemption, resurrection, and sacrifice respectively (cf. Hebrews 9:22). In Miship ritual practice, corresponding symbols blood, earth, and water represent covenant, ancestral presence, and spiritual communication. This parallelism suggests a shared semiotic framework in which material elements mediate spiritual realities, thereby reinforcing the universality of symbolic expression in ritual discourse.

Equally important is the role of performance in activating ritual language. In the liturgical context, chants are conducted within consecrated church spaces, led by priests or choirs, and involve active congregational participation. Conversely, Miship rituals take place in shrines or designated sacred environments, often under the leadership of elders or ritual specialists, and may incorporate drumming, dance, and sacrificial acts. As Victor Turner argues, ritual performance transforms ordinary space into a sacred arena, thereby intensifying the experiential dimension of the utterance.

Moreover, the efficacy of both chants and incantations is contingent upon authorized speakers. In Roman Catholicism, only ordained priests possess the institutional authority to perform key liturgical utterances. Similarly, in Miship tradition, ritual specialists such as elders or diviners derive legitimacy from cultural knowledge and spiritual competence. This aligns with J.

L. Austin’s concept of “felicity conditions,” which stipulates that performative utterances are effective only when delivered within appropriate contexts by authorized individuals.

Comparative Synthesis

The similarities and differences between the two traditions may be summarized as follows:

Feature	Liturgical Chant	Miship Incantation
Structure	Rhythmic, repetitive	Rhythmic, parallel
Function	Worship, remembrance	Invocation, transformation
Authority	Ordained priest	Ritual specialist/elder
Context	Church	Shrine or sacred space
Participation	Communal	Semi-restricted
Language Role	Symbolic and performative	Predominantly performative

In sum, while chants and incantations differ in theological orientation and ritual context, they exhibit profound structural and functional affinities. Both traditions demonstrate that ritual language is not merely expressive but constitutive of religious experience. Through repetition, symbolism, and authorized performance, sacred speech operates as a medium through which spiritual realities are invoked, enacted, and sustained. This convergence ultimately underscores a shared human reliance on language as a transformative instrument within ritual practice.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that both Christian liturgical language and African traditional incantations operate within a shared conceptual framework in which language functions as action. Through the application of Speech Act Theory, the analysis reveals that religious utterances are not merely descriptive but are deeply performative, capable of invoking, transforming, and mediating spiritual realities.

While Christian liturgical expressions derive their authority from institutional structures and doctrinal codification, African traditional incantations draw their power from ancestral legitimacy and oral transmission. Despite these differences, both systems converge in their reliance on the belief that spoken words possess intrinsic efficacy.

The study contributes to existing scholarship by providing a comparative analysis that bridges the gap between Western liturgical studies and African oral traditions. It also reinforces the relevance of Speech Act Theory as a robust analytical tool for examining ritual language across cultural contexts.

Future research may explore additional dimensions such as phonological structures, performance dynamics, and cross-religious comparisons to further deepen understanding of sacred language.

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