

Folk Literature between Traditional Cultural Space and Digital Space

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Abstract:

The article addresses the problem of the transformation of the folk cultural space from its traditional form into a digital space, in order to reveal the importance of the influence of space on the spread of oral folk forms. The article examines the different types of traditional spaces and their characteristics, then moves on to the digital space and makes a comparison between them in terms of features and characteristics. It also discusses the challenges facing oral folk forms in the context of the digital space. To the extent that digitization serves as a means of preserving these forms, it also represents a threat that endangers their existence and exposes their identity.

Keywords: Traditional cultural space, digital space, oral forms, identity.

Introduction:

Folk literature is a living memory that connects a past rich in imagined heroism and diverse myths, and various forms of oral popular expression associated with storytelling circles and traditional gatherings, with a present invaded by digitization linked to social media and virtual spaces.

How has folk literature preserved its authenticity in these new spaces? Are they truly spaces that open up horizons for its dissemination and permanence? Or are they spaces that have stripped it of its emotional and cultural substance, turning it into mere posts that pass across a mobile phone screen without real significance, where the viewer may suffice with a simple comment or a small emoji—after

the storyteller in the past would hold dedicated gatherings for an unspecified period of time?

1. The Concept of Folk Literature: Folk literature is considered the living memory of every nation, and indeed a part of its cultural and civilizational identity. It is the sum of oral forms created by a community or a nation. It is not the product of a specific individual, but rather the product of a collective that has transmitted it from one generation to another through oral narration. As stated by Ahmed Rushdi Saleh, “Folk literature emerges from the work of many generations of humanity, from the necessities of their lives, their relationships, their joys and sorrows. Its broad foundation is close to the land tilled by axes, while its final form is shaped by the anonymous, obscure masses—those who live closely connected to reality” (Saleh, 2002, p. 19).

Folk literature carries the particularities of each society and conveys the finest details of its cultural and social life; therefore, it must be preserved by all means. As noted by Nabila Ibrahim, “Thus does folk literature act; it transforms chaos into order” (Ibrahim, 1974, p. 7).

Orality remained, until recently, the only means of preserving its existence. However, in recent times, researchers and scholars of folk literature have turned to documenting it, convinced that documentation would preserve what remains of oral texts. Documentation remains one of the means of preserving it, but at the same time, it eliminates one of its most important characteristics—its orality—with all the features that this orality carries which are not found in the written text.

With the emergence of digitization, folk literature began to search for a refuge to preserve its identity, for fear of disappearance. It has thus moved from sound to text, and then from text to sound and image.

2. The Concept of Cultural Space: Cultural space is defined as the space in which cultural mediation occurs between the narrator and their audience through the exchange of various forms of popular expression. Space is not merely a geographical location; it is the sphere in which the individual feels a sense of belonging to a community with its own

customs and traditions. It is also the structure within which collective memory is formed. As Hamid Bouhabib states: “These spaces, which early folklorists saw merely as platforms for circulation, are now considered by scholars of cultural anthropology as spaces that constitute culture, meaning they are not merely points of passage. Similarly, those who transmit these expressive forms are not just narrators with rich memories, but they are creators in the fullest sense of the word” (Bouhabib, 2009, p. 8).



A mind map designed by artificial intelligence

3. Traditional Cultural Space and the Authority of Place: The traditional cultural space is closely linked to place. The geographical setting is a fundamental element in the transmission of folk literature from the narrator to the recipient. Orality, physical interaction, and the presence of human beings are essential in this process. The most important of these spaces include:

3.1. The House: The house is considered the first space associated with the individual, where life begins. Folk tales are connected to

storytelling circles that take place in the house around the hearth, in rituals related to the stories themselves. As Pierre Bourdieu states: “The domestic space is not a static space in popular imagination; rather, it is a set of signs and meanings that carry within them the concept of femininity as represented by the local masculine imagination. The house may take on a cultural, social, and psychological dimension that goes beyond its apparent structural form” (Bourdieu, 2009, p. 10).

The house makes the woman a cultural space through the practices she performs—poems and songs mixed with lamentation and complaint at times, or music and dance at other times—especially whenever the male presence is absent from the house. It also becomes a storytelling circle for folk tales at night.

3.2. The Village Council (Tajma‘at): The village council is considered one of the spaces that attract a large number of people due to the sanctity it acquires from the villagers on one hand and the authority it imposes on the other. The village council is not merely a physical place where villagers gather; it is a legal system and a constitutional space with rules that govern it, enact laws, and resolve problems. As Boujemaa Redouane explains: “It is a collective body that manages the daily affairs of the village, discusses village issues, and ensures the implementation of its decisions” (Redouane, 2002, p. 164). However, it often transforms into a space for the exchange of oral forms of expression.

3.3. The Water Spring: The village women gather at the water spring every morning and evening, which functions as a kind of village council for them. There, they meet and express all their suppressed emotions, transforming the spring into a cultural space through the poems they carry—full of emotional pleas, complaints, reproaches, and various ritual practices. As Hamid Bouhabib notes: “Women at the water spring are completely freed from social surveillance and engage in daily rituals

in this space that allow them to release all the pent-up tensions they conceal at home under the watchful eyes of husbands, brothers, and neighbors” (Bouhabib, 2009, p. 46). The water spring thus becomes an open cultural space thanks to the oral forms that women infuse into it, giving life to the spirit of the community.

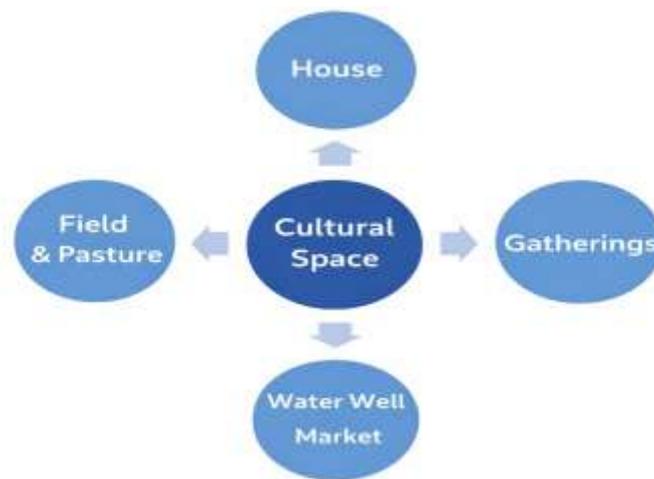
3.4. The Market: The market is considered a public space for commercial transactions, but it quickly transforms into a cultural space when a praise singer or storyteller enters, reciting their poems while people gather around them, forming a circle that continues until the storyteller leaves the market. Markets are often masculine cultural spaces, usually held weekly, and storytelling circles are among the essential gatherings in these spaces. As Abdelhamid Bourayou notes: “It represents a cultural phenomenon as much as an economic one, since people come to fulfill their material needs, but also to meet their cultural needs” (Bourayou, 1986, p. 18). Markets bring together people from different villages, allowing for the geographic spread of popular forms of expression.

3.5. The Field: During harvest and threshing seasons, fields become cultural spaces where poems and work songs emerge from the mouths of farmers. They transform into collective circles during the *twiza*, a process of solidarity and cooperation among members of the tribe. Poems serve as a means for farmers

to express their conditions and to infuse energy and vitality into the long working days.

3.6. The Pasture: The pasture represents open land, yet it can become a space for the spread of what is called shepherds’ poetry, which often has a distinct character. As Hamid Bouhabib explains: “Symbolic production

(poems, songs, stories, myths) places this group at the center of meaning production. The *Izli* poems, usually attributed to women, are often actually produced by them. Examining accumulated records in this field reveals a unique lexicon specific to shepherds” (Bouhabib, 2009, p. 58).



4. Digital Cultural Space and Global Openness: The transition from traditional space to digital space represents a radical transformation that has reshaped our relationship with cultural heritage. The individual now experiences a virtual world. Digitization is defined as “a process through

which information is converted from its traditional form—such as text files, images, maps, audio files, or any other form—into a digital form using scanners or digital cameras, in order to preserve these documents from loss or damage and make them accessible to the largest number of users” (Al-Shami, 2001, p. 192).



A diagram illustrating the elements of cyberspace

4.1. Databases: Databases contribute to documentation and digital archiving, storing folk literature in ways that preserve both sound and image.

4.2. Podcasts: Podcasts are considered an ideal space for folk tales, as they represent “any audio or visual content that is produced, edited, published, and broadcast on social media platforms by various content creators” (Ali bin Zatlá, 2025, p. 155). Folk tales have thus become oral narratives in a contemporary format.

4.3. Social Media Platforms: Social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok serve as virtual spaces for transmitting folk literature. They enable the recording and broadcasting of oral forms from narrators to reach a wide audience, thereby reviving traditional oral storytelling while maintaining its cultural and linguistic reference. Publication may also involve adapting these forms into animated content for children, particularly fairy tales, or films that bring historical heroes and folk legends back to life.

4.4. Virtual Exhibitions: Virtual exhibitions are a means to save time, effort, and distance. They allow access to a wide audience, enabling individuals to explore the content displayed from anywhere in the world without traveling. They transmit popular cultural content within its context, preserving the performance rituals and dialectical diversity.

4.5. Artificial Intelligence: Thanks to AI technologies, oral forms can be restructured in ways that align with the interests of the new generation. AI allows texts to be transformed into generative creative works, giving them flexibility and turning them from fixed scripts into dynamic narratives where sound, image, and effects are integrated.

5. The Traditional and Digital Spaces: The Dialectic of Survival: Folk literature exists amid the digital age in a state of existential tension, as digitization brings rapid development and transformation on all levels, affecting its core characteristics, methods of transmission, and reception.

Traditional Cultural Space	Digital Cultural Space
Geographical space	Virtual space
Based on orality	Digital media, screens, and algorithms
Relies on narrators	Relies on databases
Preserved by popular memory	Digital archiving
Local	Global

Transmitted from generation to generation	Rapid reception and consumption
Full of life and celebrates emotions	Static

6. Challenges: Folk literature faces numerous challenges in the digital space that threaten its existence and survival. Some of the most important include:

6.1. Loss of Live Interaction (Narrator/Recipient) and the Erosion of Natural Orality:

Folk literature relies on the duality of narrator and recipient, transmitted directly from the mouth to the ear, supported by body language, gestures, and vocal intonations. Folk literature is a living relationship closely tied to “all practices and beliefs, along with the behaviors and natures through which social relationships are realized, and the structural formation of human experience that is directly connected to society” (Fawzi Hammoudi Al-Qaisi, 1988, p. 20). For example, a folk tale must respect its rituals: “Four factors play an important role in the popularity of the folk story: place, time, narrator, and society” (Leila Roslin Quraish, 2007, p. 105). These elements are neglected in the digital space: place becomes virtual, time is linked to the present, the narrator becomes an empty machine devoid of feeling, and society becomes global—dissolving the text into the digital world.

6.2. Digital Piracy: Entering the virtual world exposes folk literature to piracy and cultural theft, as it becomes available to all, and

anyone—or any nation—can claim it as their own. Digitization strips it of its cultural reference and identity: “The winds of technology have become a threat to identity, and everyone has become deeply concerned about the fate of their identity due to this overwhelming technology. This concern has reached a level that suggests information technology could destroy cultural diversity as industrial technology nearly destroyed biological diversity” (Fawzi Hammoudi Al-Qaisi, 2011, p. 15). This leads to the erosion of local cultural specificities into a unified global digital language.

6.3. Commercialization: Folk oral forms may be transformed into quickly consumable commodities aimed at fast profit, relegating cultural content to a lower priority.

6.4. Elimination of Local Dialects: The digital space often transmits folk texts in a language understandable globally, aiming to expand the reach of oral forms. This leads to the globalization of language and the elimination of dialectal diversity. What distinguishes folk literature is its variety and the uniqueness of its dialects, through which it is known and preserved: “Language is the law imposed by the community on the individual; it is the condition set by the community for an individual to obtain a recognized social

identity. In this sense, every group must have its own language to express its culture” (Gilbert Grangium, 1995, p. 139).

6.5. Flattening of Content: Texts are stripped of their anthropological and cultural depth, becoming quickly consumable. Focus is placed on form while intellectual depth is marginalized, prioritizing likes, shares, and followers over content. Folk literature inherently contains this intellectual depth, evident in the variations within a text that preserve its anthropological and cultural richness: “What seems like a flaw inherent to orality is actually its founding principle. Variations in the text are part of a style aimed at storage in memory” (Louis-Jean Calvet, 2011, p. 8). The digital space treats these multiple versions as redundancy to be eliminated, turning oral texts into a single fixed version, which contradicts the nature of folk literature.

6.6. The Dialectic of Performance and Tool: Preserving folk literature requires a strong memory, broad knowledge of different folk forms, and an understanding of its significance as part of “the cultural stock inherited across generations, influencing people’s perceptions and behaviors, and thus carrying the values and experiences of societies” (Mohamed Al-Johari, Hassan Al-Khouli, Faten Ali Ahmed et al., 2007, p. 11). In contrast, digitization requires mastery of modern technological tools and familiarity with current techniques. Elders and

professional narrators may lack digital skills, while the younger generation may not retain traditional heritage. They belong to two different generations that are difficult to reconcile.

Conclusion:

The relationship between folk literature and digitization is not one of conflict. While folk literature represents memory, digitization serves as a tool capable of organizing this memory and disseminating it globally when properly utilized. Digitization lacks human experience, as humans are the primary and sole creators of this literature, which reflects the life of societies. Folk literature did not emerge from nothing; it is a creative representation of reality. Technology is merely a vessel to preserve it from oblivion and loss.

The future of folk literature depends on society’s awareness of the need to direct technology to serve heritage rather than obscure it. Folk literature has withstood centuries of change through its orality, and today it remains capable of asserting its presence in the digital age.

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