

TRANSLATING FOLKLORE: CULTURAL TRANSMISSION, IDENTITY AND THE CHALLENGES OF RECREATING THE ORAL TRADITION IN TRANSLATION

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Abstract:

Translation and folklore share a deep interconnection rooted in the transmission of culture, tradition, and collective memory across time and space. Folklore embodies the soul of a community through its oral narratives, myths, songs, proverbs, ballads, rituals, and legends, all of which are shaped by specific linguistic, cultural, and social contexts. The act of translating folklore, therefore, is not a mere linguistic substitution but a profound cultural negotiation. This research paper examines the relationship between translation and folklore by exploring how translators mediate between the source and target cultures while preserving the essence of oral tradition. It discusses the historical development of folklore translation, theoretical frameworks, and the challenges translators face in rendering idiomatic expressions, performative elements, local worldviews, and oral stylistics. The paper further analyses the role of translation in preserving endangered traditions, constructing national identity, and fostering intercultural dialogue. Through examples from Indian, African, and European folklore traditions, it highlights the tension between fidelity and adaptation, tradition and modernity, and orality and literacy. Ultimately, it argues that translation serves as a bridge that not only transmits folklore across linguistic boundaries but also revitalizes it for new audiences, reaffirming its role in cultural continuity and transformation.

Keywords: *Translation, Folklore, Oral Tradition, Cultural Identity, Cultural Translation, Adaptation, Orality, Intercultural Communication, Heritage Preservation*

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Introduction:

Folklore, as an integral part of a community's intangible cultural heritage, represents the collective wisdom, values, beliefs, and imagination of a people. It encompasses myths, fairy tales, legends, ballads, folk songs, riddles, proverbs, and rituals that are transmitted orally from generation to generation. Translation, on the other hand, is an act of re-creation—an attempt to carry meanings, emotions, and cultural nuances from one linguistic world into another. When these two realms intersect, the result is a deeply complex process of cultural mediation. Translating folklore is not simply about converting words; it is about transferring cultural memory embedded within linguistic forms, performative expressions, and symbolic codes. The translation of folklore brings forward crucial

questions about cultural representation and authenticity. How does a translator handle local idioms, dialects, humor, or mythological references that may not exist in the target culture? Can a translator remain faithful to the source text without distorting its cultural identity? Is adaptation a betrayal, or a necessary evolution? These questions have occupied folklorists, translators, and cultural theorists for decades. This paper seeks to explore the interface between translation and folklore as a field where language, performance, and identity intersect.

In the context of globalization and increasing cross-cultural exchanges, translating folklore gains renewed importance. Many oral traditions face extinction due to modernization, linguistic loss, and cultural assimilation. Translation, therefore, becomes a vital act

of preservation and dissemination—enabling folklore to travel beyond its local boundaries and survive in written or mediated forms. The following sections discuss how translation functions as both a cultural and linguistic process in transmitting folklore across generations and geographies.

Folklore is deeply rooted in oral culture. It belongs to communities rather than individuals, and its meaning often depends on performance, tone, rhythm, and communal participation. Walter Benjamin's idea of "the aura of authenticity" in art can be applied to folklore—once it is translated or written down, it risks losing its original vitality. Yet, translation is also what allows folklore to cross boundaries and reach new audiences.

The oral nature of folklore poses distinct challenges for translators. Oral performances depend on rhythm, gestures, repetition, and sound patterns that cannot be easily conveyed in written text. Moreover, the language of folklore is often idiomatic, metaphorical, and context-dependent. For instance, a proverb in an Indian village dialect carries layers of local experience that may not have equivalents in English or French. The translator must therefore function as both a linguist and an ethnographer, interpreting not only the language but also the worldview behind it.

Translating folklore involves reconstructing a social and performative reality in a different linguistic and cultural setting. The translator must capture the narrative structure, humor, tone, and emotional resonance of the original while adapting it for a new audience. This balance between fidelity and creativity defines the art of folklore translation.

The translation of folklore has a long and diverse history. During the 19th century, European scholars such as the Brothers Grimm, Elias Lönnrot, and Alexander Afanasyev collected and translated folk tales, songs, and myths as part of nationalist movements. These translations were often motivated

by the desire to construct a sense of national identity and cultural pride. The Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Children's and Household Tales) were translated into multiple languages and became foundational to European folklore studies.

In colonial contexts, folklore translation acquired another dimension. European colonial administrators and missionaries translated indigenous folktales and legends into European languages, often altering them to fit Western moral or religious frameworks. Such translations frequently distorted native cultures by imposing foreign interpretive categories. However, in the postcolonial era, translation has been redefined as an act of cultural reclamation. Translators from formerly colonized societies now use folklore translation to recover and assert indigenous voices.

In India, for instance, scholars like A.K. Ramanujan, G.N. Devy, and Sisir Kumar Das emphasized translation as a way to represent India's multilingual folklore heritage. Ramanujan's **Folktales from India** (1991) presented a pluralistic vision of Indian identity, where local stories from different linguistic regions coexist. Similarly, African writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have translated oral traditions to preserve precolonial wisdom and decolonize cultural narratives. Thus, folklore translation has evolved from a colonial ethnographic enterprise into a postcolonial form of cultural empowerment.

The concept of "cultural translation," as developed by theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha, Susan Bassnett, and Talal Asad, provides a useful lens for understanding folklore translation. Cultural translation refers to the transfer of cultural meanings, symbols, and values between different contexts. It involves negotiation, transformation, and reinterpretation rather than simple equivalence.

In folklore translation, this process is intensified because folklore embodies deeply localized worldviews. Translating a folktale means translating a

culture's metaphors, humor, morality, and cosmology. The translator becomes a cultural mediator who must navigate the tension between source and target traditions. Bhabha's idea of "the third space" is relevant here—it is the hybrid space where meanings are rearticulated through translation.

The oral aspect of folklore also invites the application of orality-literacy theories. Walter J. Ong and Jack Goody highlighted how oral narratives rely on formulaic expressions, mnemonic patterns, and communal participation. Translating oral folklore into written form is, therefore, a transformation from a dynamic performance into a static text. The translator must find ways to recreate the sense of spontaneity and rhythm inherent in oral storytelling. Techniques such as rhythmic prose, repetition, or the retention of dialectal features can help preserve the oral quality of the source material.

Translating folklore is fraught with linguistic, cultural, and ethical challenges. Linguistically, many folkloric expressions are rooted in local dialects, idioms, and oral formulas that lack direct equivalents in the target language. Proverbs, riddles, and folk songs often rely on puns, alliteration, or culturally specific metaphors. The translator must decide whether to domesticate (adapt to the target culture) or foreignize (retain source-culture flavor).

Culturally, folklore translation raises questions about authenticity and ownership. Since folklore belongs to a community rather than an individual author, translators must be sensitive to issues of cultural representation and appropriation. Misrepresentation can distort or exoticize the source culture.

Ethically, folklore translation requires awareness of power dynamics. In colonial or global contexts, translating folklore into dominant languages like English can lead to the erasure of local voices. Conversely, it can also serve as an act of resistance and preservation. Translators, therefore, carry the dual

responsibility of fidelity to the source culture and accessibility for the target audience.

Performance and context pose additional difficulties. Many folktales are told during festivals, rituals, or specific social settings that provide meaning. Without these contexts, translations risk appearing lifeless or fragmented. The translator must therefore recreate not only the text but also its social and emotional atmosphere.

Translation serves as both a preservative and transformative force in folklore. On one hand, it helps safeguard oral traditions by recording and transmitting them across languages and generations. On the other, translation inevitably transforms folklore—each translation is an interpretation shaped by the translator's perspective, ideology, and audience.

In India, for example, the translation of tribal folklore into mainstream languages has preserved endangered oral traditions while also integrating them into national literary canons. Works such as *Oral Epics of India* (edited by Blackburn and Ramanujan) illustrate how translation can document disappearing performances while also transforming them into written literature. Similarly, African translators have revitalized oral narratives through creative adaptations that resonate with contemporary readers.

Translation thus functions as cultural regeneration. It allows folklore to travel, evolve, and adapt without losing its core vitality. The translated folktale becomes a living dialogue between tradition and modernity.

Several examples illustrate the dynamic interplay between translation and folklore. The Panchatantra, one of India's most famous collections of animal fables, was translated from Sanskrit into Pahlavi, Arabic (*Kalila wa Dimna*), Persian, and eventually into European languages. Each version reflects the cultural values and literary styles of its translators. The Arabic version emphasized moral instruction, while European translators adapted it for children's literature. The

Panchatantra thus exemplifies how translation enables the global circulation of folklore.

In African contexts, the translation of Anansi tales from Ghana or trickster stories from Nigeria demonstrates how folklore adapts to new audiences. Translators often face the challenge of conveying African oral idioms and communal humor in European languages. Writers like Amos Tutuola and Chinua Achebe incorporated oral storytelling techniques into English narratives, blending translation and creation.

European folklore translation, too, offers insight. The Brothers Grimm edited German folktales to align with Christian morality and middle-class sensibilities, demonstrating how translation can reshape folklore ideologically. In contrast, contemporary translators strive to restore the polyphony of oral voices that earlier versions suppressed.

In India, A.K. Ramanujan's translations of Kannada, Tamil, and Telugu folktales illustrate a sensitive balance between fidelity and cultural readability. He retained local metaphors and humor while ensuring narrative flow in English. His translations reflect an awareness that folklore is not a static artifact but a living process.

Folklore translation also plays a vital role in shaping cultural and national identities. During nationalist movements, translated folklore served as a repository of collective memory. In Finland, the Kalevala—a 19th-century compilation and translation of oral poetry—became a symbol of Finnish identity. Similarly, in Ireland and India, translation helped articulate indigenous identities distinct from colonial narratives.

Translation also mediates between regional and global identities. When a Marathi or Tamil folktale is translated into English, it enters a global literary marketplace, representing local culture on an international stage. Yet, this visibility comes with the risk of simplification. Translators must balance

accessibility with cultural specificity to prevent homogenization.

Folklore translation, therefore, becomes a site of cultural politics. It can either empower marginalized voices or reinforce stereotypes, depending on how it is handled. Ethical translation practices demand collaboration with native storytellers and respect for local epistemologies.

In the digital era, translation has gained new dimensions. Online platforms, archives, and multimedia resources allow for the preservation and translation of folklore in innovative forms. Digital storytelling, subtitling, and audio-visual translations can capture performative elements that print cannot.

Digital translation projects in India, Africa, and Latin America have enabled indigenous communities to share their folklore globally. For instance, UNESCO-supported initiatives promote the translation of oral traditions into multilingual digital formats to safeguard endangered cultures. However, digitization also raises concerns about ownership, authenticity, and commercialization. Translators in the digital age must therefore navigate ethical considerations in preserving and representing oral cultures responsibly.

Conclusion:

Translation and folklore, though distinct in nature, converge as two dynamic forms of cultural transmission that preserve, reshape, and reinterpret human experience across generations. Folklore represents the oral, collective, and imaginative wisdom of a community, while translation functions as a linguistic bridge that carries this wisdom across cultural and temporal boundaries. The act of translating folklore is therefore not limited to the transference of words or stories; it is an intricate cultural undertaking that demands empathy, creativity, and a deep sense of responsibility toward both the source and target cultures. A translator engaged with folklore must understand not just the linguistic structure of a text but

also its social, emotional, and symbolic dimensions. Folklore emerges from a living context—rituals, performances, festivals, and oral exchanges—that give it meaning. When a translator works with such material, they are translating not merely narratives but entire worldviews, belief systems, and traditions embedded within them. Hence, translation becomes a cultural act that negotiates between preservation and transformation.

The translation of folklore allows it to transcend linguistic limitations and reach wider audiences, ensuring the survival of oral traditions that might otherwise fade with time. Through translation, folk tales, myths, and songs cross borders and find new life in different cultural environments. However, this transference must be handled with sensitivity so that the cultural uniqueness of the source material is not lost. The rhythm, tone, and idiomatic expressions of oral storytelling must be retained as much as possible to maintain the authenticity of the original. For instance, the musicality and repetition in a folk song or the humor embedded in local idioms often define its identity. The translator's challenge lies in re-creating these qualities in another language without flattening the cultural nuances. This requires not only linguistic proficiency but also a poetic sensibility capable of capturing the emotional depth and symbolic resonance of the original narrative.

At the same time, translation serves as a creative act that breathes new life into folklore. When a story moves from one culture to another, it undergoes a process of adaptation—sometimes subtle, sometimes transformative. Each translation adds new layers of meaning, enriching the narrative's cultural trajectory. Rather than seeing this as distortion, it can be understood as an evolution that ensures the folklore remains relevant to changing audiences and historical contexts. In this way, translation contributes to the continuity of human imagination, enabling ancient

stories to speak anew to contemporary readers and listeners. However, while translating, it is essential not to erase the cultural difference that defines the folklore's originality. Instead, translation should highlight and celebrate this diversity, allowing audiences to experience the richness of unfamiliar traditions.

Ultimately, the translator of folklore acts as a cultural mediator—one who stands between two worlds, facilitating dialogue between the past and the present, the local and the global, the oral and the written. This mediating role requires balancing fidelity to the source culture with the intelligibility needed for the target audience. The translator must approach folklore with reverence for its communal ownership and awareness of its historical and ideological contexts, particularly when dealing with marginalized or indigenous traditions. By doing so, the translator ensures that folklore continues to resonate across time and languages, preserving its essence while allowing it to evolve. In essence, translating folklore is an act of cultural preservation and renewal—it ensures that the voice of humanity's collective past, carried through myths and oral tales, continues to inspire future generations and enrich the global mosaic of cultural expression.

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