From Oral to Digital: The Adaptation of African Folktales in Social Media Spaces

By

Edith Chinyere Anucha, PhD
Department of Foreign Languages and International Studies,
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt
Email: anuch.edith@iaue.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper presents a method of reframing African folktales from oral tradition to digital form within social media spaces. It proposes that social media platforms have not only extended oral stories into linguistic forms but have drastically redefined their content, narrative, author, and circulation. With an understanding of recent research from African literary scholars, digital humanities, and media theory, this paper investigates the process of forming folktales in multimodal, participatory and algorithmically mediated forms. And its implications are further considered for cultural authentication, authorship and the politics of digital visibility. The paper concludes that while social media reinvigorates African folktales, but also widens their global scope and poses fresh challenges for commodification, datafication and cultural ownership.

Keywords: African folktales, oral stories, social media, digital humanities, adaptation

Introduction

Historical use of African folktales is of the sense that it was to establish that stories to develop into spoken words. These stories, intertwined with myths, legends, proverbs, and fables, serve as an essential mode for safeguarding knowledge, moral education and social identification (Finnegan, 2012). They are the traditions which was traditionally rehearsed in communal contexts; oral storytelling used memory, voice, gesture, and audience contact. Amid the changes of digital technologies, mainly social media, there are also some other modes of storytelling that make sense of the temporal, spatial, and performative constraints on oral

traditions. Mobile platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and podcasts are becoming places in which African folktales are rewritten, rearranged, and rebroadcast across the planet. This reflects critical ramifications about how oral narratives are transformed to global forms in the digital world.

Scope of the Study

This paper addresses what African folktales do to remain present in a digital space, the changes and alteration in ways of life and in an individual era. Based on large data sets and social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and podcasting channels, it's more and more oriented toward an African context as a whole, particularly among Anglophone societies due to digital contents as well as scholarly writing available on platforms. But it also recognises the greater scope of interdisciplinary regional diversity of oral tradition and the transcultural dissemination of folktales in the electronic realm. It focuses on oral genres including folktales, fables and moral narratives, without the general of other oral modes such as epic poetry and ritual performance, except when intertwined with digital adaptation. Methodologically, it is qualitative and interpretive all that this work not has any empirical audience analysis or platform-specific data. The only way the paper analyzes those and provides examples of racial variation and hegemony that the digital media are replacing is theoretical. Moreover, despite having heard some concerns about digital inequity, or infrastructural limitations, such limitations will not be detailed

Literature Review

Scholarship on African oral literature has long emphasized its centrality to the continent's literary and cultural traditions. Foundational studies, particularly those by Finnegan (2012), established oral literature as a complex and structured system encompassing narrative, performance, and social function. Finnegan's work remains influential in demonstrating that oral narratives are not primitive or informal but are governed by sophisticated aesthetic and communicative conventions. However, early scholarship tended to treat oral literature as static or archival, focusing on preservation rather than transformation.

Subsequent research has challenged this static view by foregrounding the dynamism and adaptability of African oral traditions. Barber (2007) argues that African oral and popular cultures are inherently fluid, constantly evolving in response to changing social and material conditions. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of digital media, where oral narratives continue to adapt to new modes of expression and dissemination. Similarly, Okpewho (1992) emphasizes the performative and contextual nature of oral literature, highlighting how meaning is generated through interaction between storyteller and audience. These insights provide a foundation for understanding how digital environments reshape, rather than replace, oral traditions.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the intersection of African literature and digital media. Adenekan's (2021) work is particularly significant in this regard, offering a detailed analysis of how digital platforms transform literary production in African contexts. He argues that digital environments enable new forms of authorship and readership, challenging traditional publishing hierarchies while simultaneously reflecting broader social inequalities. His emphasis on class and access underscores the fact that digital literary spaces are not universally accessible, but are shaped by structural constraints.

Nesbitt-Ahmed (2017) further develops this line of inquiry by examining online literary platforms as spaces of cultural reclamation and innovation. Her study demonstrates that digital media allow African writers to bypass institutional gatekeeping and engage directly with audiences. Importantly, she highlights the participatory nature of digital literary culture, where readers are not merely consumers but active contributors to the circulation and interpretation of texts. This participatory dynamic resonates with the communal orientation of oral storytelling, suggesting a continuity between traditional and digital forms.

Edoro (2015) situates digital African literature within broader debates on literary value and canon formation. She argues that online platforms challenge established hierarchies by creating alternative spaces for literary production and criticism. However, she also cautions that digital visibility does not necessarily translate into

literary legitimacy, as online content is often evaluated through metrics of popularity rather than aesthetic criteria. This tension between accessibility and value is central to understanding the transformation of African folktales in social media contexts.

Yékú's contributions provide a critical theoretical lens for examining these developments. In his analysis of digital African literatures, Yékú (2021) introduces the concept of the "coloniality of data," which highlights how digital infrastructures reproduce global power imbalances. He argues that African digital cultural production is shaped by platforms that are controlled by external actors, raising concerns about ownership, representation, and visibility. In his later work on cultural netizenship, Yékú (2022) further explores how social media enables new forms of cultural participation while simultaneously subjecting users to algorithmic governance.

Beyond literary studies, research in digital humanities and media studies has also contributed to understanding the transformation of oral traditions. Bolter and Grusin's (1999) concept of remediation provides a useful framework for analyzing how oral narratives are reconfigured within digital media. According to this framework, new media do not replace older forms but refashion them, incorporating elements of earlier practices while introducing new affordances. This perspective is particularly relevant for analyzing the adaptation of folktales in social media spaces, where oral storytelling is translated into multimodal formats.
Recent studies have begun to explore the specific ways in which African oral narratives are adapted in digital environments. Afolabi and Odetunji (2022) examine the digital animation of Yorùbá folktales, demonstrating how traditional narratives can be reinterpreted through visual media. Their work highlights both the creative potential of digital adaptation and the challenges of maintaining cultural authenticity. Similarly, emerging research on digital storytelling platforms emphasizes the role of multimedia and interactivity in reshaping narrative forms.
Despite these advances, significant gaps remain in the literature. First, much of the existing scholarship focuses on digital literature broadly rather than on specific genres such as folktales. Second, there is limited integration between studies of oral literature and digital humanities methodologies, particularly in relation to

multimodal analysis and platform studies. Third, there is a need for more sustained engagement with the implications of digital adaptation for authorship, ownership, and cultural preservation.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on the adaptation of African folktales within social media environments. It brings together insights from oral literature studies, digital humanities, and media theory to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how traditional narratives are transformed in contemporary digital contexts.

Theoretical Framework: Orality, Remediation and Networked Culture

The transformation of African folktales in digital spaces can be understood through three interrelated theoretical concepts: orality, remediation, and networked culture.

Orality emphasizes performance, embodiment, and communal interaction (Finnegan, 2012). Remediation, as articulated by Bolter and Grusin (1999), describes how new media refashion older media forms. Networked culture highlights the role of digital platforms in shaping communication through connectivity and participation.

Together, these frameworks reveal that digital folktales are not simply translations of oral narratives but reconfigurations shaped by technological affordances and constraints.

Multimodal Adaptation and Narrative Transformation

Digital platforms transform folktales into multimodal narratives that combine text, audio, video, and visual effects. This shift expands the expressive possibilities of storytelling but alters its sensory and performative dimensions.

Afolabi and Odetunji (2022) demonstrate how Yorùbá folktales are adapted into digital animations, illustrating both continuity and transformation. While narrative structures are preserved, the embodied aspects of performance are reinterpreted through visual media.

Participatory Culture and Networked Storytelling

Social media platforms enable participatory storytelling practices that echo the communal nature of oral traditions. Users engage with narratives through commenting, sharing, and remixing, contributing to their evolution (Nesbitt-Ahmed, 2017).

However, this participation is mediated by platform structures that shape visibility and engagement. Folktales become part of a networked system where meaning is co-produced but also regulated.

Authorship, Ownership, and Cultural Authority

The adaptation of folktales in digital spaces complicates traditional notions of authorship. Oral narratives are collectively owned, while digital platforms often privilege individual creators.

This tension raises questions about intellectual property and cultural ownership. The commodification of folktales in digital spaces further complicates these issues.

Platform Capitalism and Algorithmic Mediation

Digital storytelling operates within systems of platform capitalism that prioritize data extraction and engagement. Yékú (2021) argues that these systems shape cultural production through algorithmic governance.

Folktales adapted for social media may be modified to align with platform logics, influencing their form and content.

Toward a Theory of Networked Orality

This paper proposes networked orality as a conceptual framework for understanding the hybridization of oral and digital storytelling. This framework recognizes both continuity and transformation, emphasizing the interplay between communal practices and technological mediation.

Conclusion

The adaptation of African folktales in social media spaces represents a complex transformation that redefines storytelling, authorship, and cultural authority. While digital platforms enable new forms of creativity and participation, they also introduce new constraints.

Future research must adopt interdisciplinary approaches that integrate literary analysis with digital methodologies to fully capture the dynamics of networked orality.

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