Folk Literature and the Problematic of Inherited Meaning: The Dialectic of Preservation and Cultural Reproduction (Examples from Algerian Folk Heritage)

الأدب الشعبي واشكالية المعنى الموروث: في جدلية الحفظ وإعادة انتاج الثقافة (نماذج من التراث الشعبي الجزائري)

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Abstract:

This article seeks to approach Algerian folk literature from a perspective that goes beyond viewing it as a static repository of cultural heritage, considering it instead as a dynamic system that contributes to the reproduction of meaning within the community. The research departs from the hypothesis that folk literature does not merely fulfil a preservational function, but exercises an interpretive act through which it reshapes civilizational consciousness in accordance with the transformations of the social and cultural context.

Drawing on an interpretive-anthropological approach, the article examines examples from folk tales, proverbs, and traditional Algerian songs as living representations of a collective memory in constant renewal. The research concludes that inherited meaning in folk literature is not a fixed given, but a

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transforming construction subject to continuous reproduction, making folk literature a space for the reformulation of both culture and identity simultaneously.

Keywords: Algerian folk literature, inherited meaning, collective memory, cultural reproduction, interpretation, cultural anthropology.

ملخص:

يسعى هذا المقال إلى مقاربة الأدب الجزائري من زاوية إشكالية تتجاوز النظر إليه بوصفه خزانا ساكنا للموروث الثقافي، إلى اعتباره نسقا ديناميا يسهم في إعادة انتاج المعنى داخل الجماعة، وينطلق البحث من فرضية مفادها أن الأدب الشعبي لا يكتفي بوظيفة الحفظ، بل يمارس فعلا تأويليا يعيد من خلاله تشكيل الوعي الحضاري وفق تحولات السياق الاجتماعي والثقافي.

واعتمادا على مقاربة تأويلية ـ أنثروبولوجيا، يقف المقال عند نماذج من الحكاية الشعبية والأمثال، والأغنية التقليدية الجزائرية، بوصفها تمثلات حية لذاكرة جماعية تتجدد باستمرار، ويخلص البحث إلى أن المعنى الموروث في الأدب الشعبي ليس معطى ثابتا، بل بناء متحوّل يخضع لإعادة انتاج مستمرة، مما يجعل الأدب الشعبي فضاء لإعادة صياغة الثقافة والهوية في آن واحد.

كلمات مفتاحية: الأدب الشعبي الجزائري، المعنى الموروث، الذاكرة الجماعية، إعادة إنتاج الثقافة، التأويل، الأنثروبولوجيا الثقافية.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Folk literature in contemporary studies is no longer merely a heritage material invoked as a remnant of the past; it has become a fertile field for rethinking the nature of the relationship between culture, memory, and meaning. What folk tales, proverbs, and traditional songs contain does not limit itself to recording the community's experiences, but goes beyond that to constructing symbolic representations that contribute to shaping its consciousness of itself and of the world.

In this context, Algerian folk heritage stands out as one of the richest fields in terms of the diversity of its forms and the multiplicity of its meanings, reflecting a civilizational and cultural layering that extends across different historical eras—from the Amazigh to the Arab to the Islamic, up to modern interactions. Yet the problem that presents itself does not concern the abundance of this heritage so much as the manner of understanding it:

> Is folk literature merely a medium for preserving inherited meaning? Or is it a cultural agent that reproduces this meaning according to the conditions of the present?

From this vantage point, the problematic of this research is founded upon a questioning of production. Inherited material, in this view, is not regarded as a fixed given, but as an open horizon for reinterpretation, where collective memory interweaves with the mechanisms of narration and imagination to produce new meaning. Proceeding from this, the article seeks to deconstruct this dialectic by analyzing examples from Algerian folk heritage,

drawing on an interpretive approach that invokes the anthropological dimension, with the aim of revealing how folk literature transforms from a mere carrier of meaning into a producer of it.

Research Problem

To what extent does folk literature remain a preserver of inherited meaning, and to what extent does it contribute to its reproduction and formulation within the transformations of cultural and civilizational consciousness?

Accordingly, the study of Algerian folk literature from this perspective demands an approach that moves beyond description toward analysis, and beyond classification toward the deconstruction of the semantic structures latent within folk texts. The matter is not merely concerned with identifying the genres of folk literature or collecting its material, but fundamentally with how meaning operates within this cultural system, and how it is reproduced through indirect mechanisms in which memory intertwines with imagination, and individual experience with collective consciousness.

This shift in perspective allows a deeper understanding of the nature of folk literature as an indirect cultural discourse, functioning through symbol, suggestion, and condensation rather than through declaration and directness. Meaning in the folk text is not presented readymade but is gradually built through the interaction between the text and its recipient, such that every new reading or narration is an implicit reproduction of that meaning rather than a mere consumption of it. From this, the dynamism of folk literature as a text open to multiple interpretive possibilities—

which change with the change of social and cultural contexts—becomes manifest.

Proceeding from this, the article is founded on the hypothesis that Algerian folk literature does not function as a living space for the reproduction of this memory, where meanings are renewed in accordance with the transformations of the social context and the changing patterns of reception. The inherited material, within this framework, is not static but is a transforming entity continuously reshaped within oral and cultural practice.

Based on this vision, the research seeks to approach some examples from Algerian folk heritage—tales and folk proverbs—with the aim of revealing the mechanisms of meaning-production within them, and how meaning transforms from a mere oral heritage into a significant cultural discourse reflecting the depth of the community's historical and social experience. This is done through the adoption of an interpretive–anthropological approach that allows understanding of folk literature as a cultural practice that produces meaning rather than merely carrying it.

In this way, folk literature no longer remains a mere artifact of the past, but transforms into a living horizon for rethinking culture itself, for how meaning is formed within it, and for the manner in which the community reproduces its identity through narration, language, and symbol.

1. Folk Literature and the Problematic of Inherited Meaning

Folk literature is among the most problematic cultural fields in contemporary Arab studies. For a long time it oscillated between being a heritage material to be collected and classified, and being

a semantic system that reflects the structure of collective thought within society. Modern studies have contributed to its rehabilitation as a living cultural discourse, not merely oral remnants of the past, but a space for the production of meaning and its reshaping within the community.

In this context, Abd al-Malik Murtad notes that "folk literature is not a simple expression of daily life, but a form of collective consciousness that is embodied in language, image, and symbol"[1], which means that the folk text cannot be read superficially but must be regarded as a symbolic structure through which the community represents itself and the world around it. From this it follows that "the inherited meaning in folk literature is not understood as a fixed or final meaning, but as a transforming meaning that takes shape within the context of oral circulation. The folk text—whether a tale, a proverb, or a song—is not transmitted verbatim but undergoes processes of continuous modification and reformulation, making it a text open to interpretation that is renewed with each act of narration or performance.

Said Yaqtin, in his discussion of Arab narrative, affirms that narratives "however diverse their sources, do not acquire their significance except within the context of reception and circulation"[2], which applies clearly to folk literature, where the text cannot be separated from the oral act that reproduces it each time.

In Algerian studies, Mouloud Mammeri gave early attention to the Amazigh folk tale, considering it "a guardian of collective memory and a mirror of the social and cultural structure of the Algerian person"[3], which reveals that folk heritage in Algeria is

not a mere cultural luxury, but a bearer of deep historical and social memory that transcends the limits of entertainment. In the same direction, Abd al-Hamid Bourayou holds that the Algerian folk tale "functions as a symbolic system that reproduces values and social norms within the community"[4], which reinforces the idea that folk literature does not limit itself to transmitting meaning, but reproduces it in accordance with the transformations of the social and cultural context.

Based on this, it can be said that Algerian folk literature is founded on a delicate dialectic between preservation and reproduction: on the one hand, it preserves collective memory with all its values and experiences, and on the other, it continuously reshapes this memory through the mechanisms of oral narration and social circulation. Meaning in this context is not a readymade given, but a dynamic construction that changes with the change of contexts and times.

Folk proverbs—among the most condensed forms in Algerian heritage—do not function as rigid rules, but as symbolic formulas for interpreting and reinterpreting reality. They compress long collective experience into dense linguistic formulations, yet at the same time remain amenable to re-employment according to situation and context, making their meaning open and ever-renewed.

The Algerian folk song, for its part, represents an expressive space that combines memory and emotion, where its function is not limited to entertainment but extends to preserving collective experience in a symbolic musical form. It reproduces moments of joy and sorrow, resistance and nostalgia, transforming them into a

living acoustic memory. The study of folk literature from this perspective therefore demands an approach that regards the folk text as a moving semantic structure rather than a fixed heritage material. Meaning in folk literature does not exist outside social interaction but takes shape within it, through a continuous relationship between text, recipient, and context.

Accordingly, Algerian folk literature is not reduced to being a guardian of heritage, but is understood as a cultural agent participating in the reproduction and renewal of this heritage, making it one of the most important mechanisms of cultural identity construction in Algerian society.

2. The Dynamism of Inherited Meaning in Algerian Folk Literature (Between Theoretical Framing and Textual Operation)

The transition from the general theoretical approach to folk literature toward the level of textual analysis requires a reconsideration of the concept of "inherited meaning" itself—not as a readymade given transmitted across generations, but as a semantic process that takes shape within cultural practice. The inherited, in proportion to how it is rebuilt through such practice, is what makes folk literature a space for the production of meaning rather than a mere repository of it. From this standpoint, the Algerian folk text cannot be treated as a bearer of fixed meaning, since its stability is confined—in most cases—to the structural level, that is, to the level of formulas, structures, characters, and narrative patterns.

Meaning, by contrast, remains subject to continuous transformations through reception and circulation. The folk text lives within collective memory, but is not retrieved from it as it

originally was; rather, it is reshaped each time it is narrated or invoked, which endows it with a dynamic character. This distinction between the stability of structure and the transformation of signification allows a deeper understanding of the nature of folk literature: the same tale, the same proverb, or the same song may appear in closely related versions but with different meanings, depending on the diversity of social and cultural contexts. Meaning here is not understood as an internal property of the text but as the result of an interaction between the text and its context, and between the text and its recipient.

In this framework, Abd al-Hamid Bourayou holds that the folk text does not acquire its significance merely within the conditions of its production and circulation, but because it is "linked to social and cultural functions that render it amenable to reshaping"[5], which confirms that meaning is not a fixed given but a transforming construction. Abd al-Malik Murtad likewise argues that informal discourse, including folk discourse, is founded on suggestion and displacement, making it open to a plurality of readings and interpretations.[6]

The nature of oral circulation adds another dimension to this dynamism, since the folk text is not subject to the authority of fixation, but remains open to the intervention of both narrator and recipient alike. The narrator does not limit himself to transmitting the text but reshapes it according to his own vision and context, while the recipient in turn does not receive meaning passively but participates in its production through interpretation. This continuous interaction keeps the folk text in a state of "permanent renewal," in which meaning is formed anew each time.

If we add to this the particularity of the Algerian context—with its cultural and linguistic plurality—we find ourselves before a composite folk text in which layers of meaning are intertwined: some go back to distant historical origins, others are formed in the present. This intertwining does not lead to a dispersal of meaning but to its enrichment, as the text becomes a space for the interaction of different periods and references.

Yet this dynamism—a source of wealth for folk literature—may in some cases turn into a factor of confusion, particularly when a text is conveyed outside its cultural context or re-employed in spaces that do not belong to its original structure. In such cases, it is not only the meaning that is transformed but potentially emptied of its significance, which raises the problematic of the relationship between circulation and the production of meaning.

It follows that the analysis of Algerian folk texts should not limit itself to revealing their contents, but must move toward understanding the manner in which these contents are reproduced within context. Meaning does not exist in the text as a fixed essence, but takes shape through a complex process of interaction between structure and circulation, between preservation and transformation—which is what makes folk literature an open field for reading and interpretation. Proceeding from this framework, working on Algerian folk examples (tale, proverb, song) becomes an entry point for revealing this dynamism, by tracing how meaning transforms within them and passes from being inherited to being ever-renewed.

3. The Operation of Inherited Meaning in the Algerian Folk Text (An Analytical Approach)

This section departs from the fundamental idea that the Algerian folk text does not present meaning as a readymade content, but as a trace that takes shape within oral circulation. Inherited meaning is not preserved in its original form, but is reproduced through modification, addition, omission, and reinterpretation, making the folk text an open space for the continuous reconstruction of meaning.

3.1 The Folk Tale: Between Structural Fixity and Semantic Variability

In some areas of the Algerian high plateaus, a tale is narrated that begins with the formula:[7]

> **"كان يا مكان، راجل فقير يخدم في أرض الغير، وكل ما يزيد خيره تزيد عين الناس عليه "**
>
> *("Once upon a time, a poor man who worked on others' land—the more his fortunes grew, the more people's envy of him grew...")*

The narrative structure appears simple:

Trial ← Escape ← Envy ← Poverty

Yet close analysis reveals that meaning does not centre around the event, but around the transformations of "the social gaze" toward poverty and success. Envy here is not merely an individual feeling; it represents a mechanism of social interpretation for the gap between people—that is, the community does not interpret economic transformation from an economic standpoint but from a

symbolic one (the evil eye / envy / blessing). Here the fundamental transformation occurs:

The text is narratively stable.

But meaning shifts from: moral interpretation ← to social interpretation ← to fatalistic interpretation.

That is, the tale does not transmit reality, but reproduces a collective interpretation of reality.

3.2 The Ghūla as a Multi-Layered Symbol

In folk tales of northeastern Algeria, the character of the "Ghūla" (ogress) appears in different forms, such as:

> **"الغولة كانت تسكن الجبل كل من يمر من طريقها لا يعود"**
>
> *("The Ghūla dwelt in the mountain—whoever passed by her path never returned...")*

Yet in other oral versions, the Ghūla transforms into:

– A woman isolated from the tribe

– Or a symbol of fear of the unknown

– Or an image of invisible authority

This transformation reveals that the "Ghūla" is not a fixed mythical character, but a symbolic structure amenable to reinterpretation:

In the traditional reading: Ghūla ← absolute evil

In the cultural reading: Ghūla ← embodiment of social limits (fear, prohibition, taboo)

The symbol thereby shifts from a "being" to a "social signification."

4. The Folk Proverb and the Reproduction of Collective Experience

The folk proverb, at its surface level, is a stable linguistic unit—yet this apparent stability conceals a profound semantic movement.

4.1 The Folk Proverb as an Open Interpretive Structure

In some areas of western Algeria, a folk proverb circulates:

> **"اللي يسقسي على راسو، يلقى اللي يجرحو"**
>
> *("He who inquires about himself will find what wounds him.")*[8]

This proverb does not operate with a single meaning, but produces a network of significations:

– In a social context: a critique of excessive curiosity and the fragility of knowledge when it touches the self.

– In a psychological context: a warning against confronting the painful truth.

– In a moral context: it is understood as a critique of inquisitiveness.

What is important here is that "the question" does not mean knowledge alone, but the risk of exposing the self.

The proverb, therefore, does not change; rather, the "locus of meaning" within it changes—that is, it does not carry a signification but activates it according to context, and it does not merely teach but produces a conception of the relationship between knowledge and pain.

4.2 The Semantic Displacement of the Central Term within the Proverb

The power of semantic displacement in the folk proverb lies in the capacity of its central words to be re-employed. In the proverb:

> **"الدار اللي ما فيهاش نار، ما فيهاش قرار"**
>
> *("The house that has no fire has no rest.")*

The word "fire" (نار) appears on the surface as a positive element (warmth, life), but it shifts semantically according to context to become:

– A sign of conflict within the family

– Or a symbol of social vitality

– Or an indicator of the absence of tranquil stability

That is, the same word carries an internal semantic opposition that keeps the proverb open to contradictory readings without losing its coherence. What might be termed "multiplicity of signification within unity of formulation" becomes apparent here.

4.3 Context as Producer of Meaning, Not Merely Its Transmitter

In Algerian folk circulation, the proverb does not operate in isolation from context; rather, its meaning is determined through it. The proverb:

"اللي يحسب وحدو يضحك حدُو"

("He who reckons alone laughs alone.")[†]

May be:

– A critique of individualism

– Or a sarcastic comment on failure

– Or a warning against poor judgment

But the determination of meaning does not occur within the text, but within the social situation in which it is uttered. Context thus transforms from a mere external frame into a fundamental semantic agent—that is, it is not merely the circumstance of speech but a part of the production of meaning itself.

5. Semantic Displacement in the Algerian Folk Song and the Reproduction of Emotional Meaning

5.1 The Folk Song as a Moving Semantic Structure

The Algerian folk song operates as an oral text open to transformation: its meaning does not settle within the words, but takes shape through performance, context, and reception. It is not merely an aesthetic expression of emotion, but a symbolic device that reproduces collective experience in an emotional form amenable to interpretation.

In a widely circulated verse from the folk song:

"يا قلبي واش درت لروحي غير الهم زادني جُروحِي"

[†]An Algerian folk proverb, orally circulated in some areas of central and western Algeria.

("O my heart, what have you done to my soul —
only anguish has multiplied my wounds.")[9]

The text appears outwardly as an expression of individual pain, yet its semantic structure does not refer to a single self but to a collective experience amenable to repetition. "The heart" here is not understood as a vital organ but as a symbolic centre of emotional and social rupture, making meaning open to multiple levels of reading. The song thus does not produce a fixed meaning, but opens a space for semantic displacement between the individual and the collective, between the subjective and the symbolic.

When the same verse is performed in a sorrowful context, it transforms into a discourse of existential rupture, while in a celebratory context it may be understood as a fleeting emotional invocation. Thus it is not merely subject to a multiplicity of meanings according to the manner and occasion of its singing. This transformation makes the folk song a space of continuous semantic displacement, where its meaning cannot be fixed outside the moment of performance.

5.2 From Individual Experience to Collective Memory

The folk song is founded on transforming individual experience into an experience amenable to generalization: the suffering that appears personal in the text transforms, through collective reception, into a shared memory.

In a widely circulated verse:

"يا يما خوذيني للسماح، الدنيا ولات جراح "

("O mother, take me to forgiveness — the world has become all wounds.")[10]

The text here produces a dual semantic movement:

On the one hand: an expression of individual pain linked to the self.

On the other hand: a transformation of this pain into a collective symbol of social distress or estrangement.

The song thus moves from the level of expression to the level of symbolic representation, where it does not reflect reality but reformulates it in emotional form.

Conclusion

This study has made clear that Algerian folk literature does not function as a bearer of fixed meanings, but as a moving semantic system founded on the reproduction of meaning within multiple circulatory contexts. The tale, the proverb, and the song do not transmit collective experience as it is, but reshape it through mechanisms of displacement and interpretation, placing inherited meaning in a state of perpetual formation.

The analysis has shown that this transformation does not constitute a flaw in the structure, but represents the very essence of the operation of the folk text, founded as it is on the interaction between structural stability and semantic openness. Yet this dynamism—which grants folk heritage its vitality—places it, at the same time, before contemporary challenges, particularly given

the transformation of circulatory patterns and the migration of texts to open spaces.

From the foregoing emerges a matter of considerable importance relating to the preservation of this heritage from forms of dispossession—what is known as the theft of heritage—whereby elements of folk heritage are in many cases re-employed outside their traditional context or attributed to other spaces, leading to the deconstruction of their original signification and the weakening of their connection to their social reference. The danger of this phenomenon does not lie only in the loss of attribution, but in the loss of meaning itself—because the folk text, as the study has shown, does not carry its signification within itself, but acquires it from its circulatory context. Conveying it outside this context does not merely transmit the text, but may reproduce it in a form that empties it of its symbolic charge.

From this it becomes clear that preserving Algerian folk heritage is a twofold task:

– It does not limit itself to documentation and collection

– But extends to preserving its cultural and semantic context as an essential condition for the continuity of its meaning.

This situation also requires the development of scientific approaches that combine textual analysis with fieldwork, allowing this heritage to be anchored within its reference while at the same time opening to modern mechanisms for its protection—whether through digital documentation or the legal framework for intangible heritage. The safeguarding of folk literature therefore does not mean its freezing, but the framing of its transformation

in a manner that ensures the continuity of its dynamism without the loss of its identity, so that it remains a living space for the production of meaning rather than material amenable to dispossession or emptying.

Opens with an introduction that presents the specific problem.

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[5] Abd al-Hamid Bourayou, Algerian Folk Literature (op. cit.), p. 118.

[6] See Abd al-Malik Murtad, Analysis of Narrative Discourse (op. cit.), p. 78.

[7] The "Ghūla" tale from Algerian folk heritage, an oral narrative in circulation across multiple regions of Algeria, particularly in the central and eastern areas, in various versions.

[8] An Algerian folk proverb, in circulation in the Algerian domestic environment, with multiple versions.

[9] A verse from an Algerian folk song, orally circulated in the urban milieu.

[10] A verse from a local Algerian folk song, in circulation in western Algeria.