

Retelling Tamil Folklore in the Digital Age: Oral Traditions, YouTube and Instagram

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Abstract: Tamil folklore has traditionally circulated through oral narration, performance, repetition, memory, and community participation. Folk tales, village legends, proverbs, songs, Villupattu, Therukoothu, and narratives associated with local traditions have been transmitted through culturally situated relationships between storyteller, audience, place, and occasion. The expansion of YouTube and Instagram has introduced new conditions for the circulation of these traditions. Folk narratives can now be recorded, edited, visualized, shared, commented upon, and encountered by audiences far removed from their original communities. This paper examines this transformation through the concept of “platform storytelling.” Drawing upon folklore studies, performance theory, cultural representation, convergence culture, and digital folklore studies, it argues that digital platforms do not merely preserve Tamil folklore but participate in its re-narrativisation. The camera changes the performance frame, editing changes narrative duration, platform conventions encourage different forms of storytelling, and algorithmic systems influence cultural visibility. Villupattu and Therukoothu demonstrate the transformation of performance and audience, while village legends, proverbs, and folk narratives illustrate the compression and contextual displacement that can occur in short-form digital media. The contemporary Tamil song “Enjoy Enjaami” further demonstrates how inherited folk-cultural resources can be transformed into new digital cultural productions rather than simply preserved in their earlier forms. The paper argues that YouTube and Instagram create different environments for cultural transmission: YouTube can accommodate extended performances and narratives, whereas Instagram encourages shorter, visually immediate fragments. Tamil folklore in the digital age is therefore neither simply preserved nor replaced. It is reconfigured through an interaction among tradition, technology, creators, audiences, and platform structures.

Keywords: Tamil folklore, oral tradition, digital folklore, platform storytelling, YouTube, Instagram, Villupattu, Therukoothu, folk narratives, cultural memory

1. Introduction

Folklore survives through transmission, and transmission has never meant complete repetition. Stories change when they move between narrators, songs acquire regional variations, proverbs are applied to new situations, and performances adapt to different audiences. Folklore is therefore better understood as a continuing cultural process than as a fixed collection of traditional texts. Dan Ben-Amos's contextual approach emphasizes that folklore must be understood in relation to the situations in which it is communicated, while Alan Dundes's work similarly draws attention to folklore as expressive culture connected with communities and shared cultural practices. These approaches are particularly relevant to contemporary folklore because the conditions of transmission are changing rapidly. When an oral narrative moves from a village gathering to YouTube or Instagram, its content may remain recognizable, but its communicative environment is transformed.

Tamil Nadu provides a rich field for examining this transformation. Tamil folk culture encompasses oral tales, village legends, proverbs, riddles, folk songs, Villupattu, Therukoothu, ritual narratives, and stories associated with local deities and communities. These traditions have historically depended upon voice, memory, performance, locality, and audience interaction. Research on Tamil village-deity traditions, for instance, identifies narrative forms such as Therukoothu, Villupattu, and Udukkai Pattu as important means through which local myths and cultural experiences



are communicated. Therukoothu itself is documented as a longstanding Tamil folk dramatic tradition associated with performance, storytelling, music, ritual, and community participation. The cultural significance of such forms therefore lies not merely in their verbal content but in the social circumstances of their performance.

Richard Bauman's theory of verbal art as performance is useful in understanding this relationship. Performance is not simply the delivery of a predetermined text; it is a communicative event involving performer, audience, setting, and culturally recognizable strategies of presentation (Bauman 97). A Villupattu performance, for example, depends upon voice, rhythm, music, humour, repetition, and interaction. A Therukoothu performance depends not only upon dialogue but also upon costume, movement, music, space, and spectatorship. When such forms are recorded and circulated digitally, the performance becomes available beyond its original location, but the original relationship between performer and audience is altered.

The study of digital folklore has demonstrated that the Internet is not merely an archive for traditional culture. Trevor J. Blank's *Folklore and the Internet* established the Internet as an important environment for vernacular expression, while Simon J. Bronner's discussion of digitization and virtualization showed how technological mediation can become part of the continuing history of folklore (Blank; Bronner). Andrew Peck and Trevor J. Blank further demonstrate that social media creates distinctive conditions for contemporary folklore, where users participate in the circulation, reinterpretation, and transformation of cultural materials (Peck and Blank). The digital environment should therefore be approached as a cultural space in which folklore continues to develop.

The present paper uses the term "platform storytelling" to describe the transformation of oral and folk narratives within digital platforms. The term emphasizes that YouTube and Instagram are not passive containers. Their interfaces, audiovisual formats, editing conventions, audience structures, and recommendation systems influence how stories are produced and encountered. A village legend narrated before a community is different from the same legend presented through a YouTube video with photographs and background music. A proverb spoken in everyday conversation is different from the same proverb transformed into an Instagram graphic. A Villupattu performance recorded in full is different from a thirty-second excerpt selected for a Reel. The movement to digital media therefore involves re-narrativisation rather than simple reproduction.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach based on existing scholarship on folklore, performance, digital culture, and Tamil folk traditions. It does not claim to provide original quantitative measurements of views, followers, or engagement. Instead, it examines representative forms of Tamil folklore and considers the ways in which their communicative structures are altered when they enter digital platforms. The discussion combines folklore theory with performance studies, cultural representation, convergence theory, and digital folklore scholarship.

Ben-Amos and Dundes provide the foundation for understanding folklore as contextual and community-linked expressive culture. Bauman's performance theory draws attention to the event-like nature of oral expression. Blank and Bronner establish the Internet as an environment in which folklore can be transmitted and transformed, while Peck and Blank extend this discussion into social media. Flinterud's recent study is particularly relevant to the present argument because she proposes that algorithms themselves participate in the production and transmission of folklore on social-media platforms. She argues that algorithms can simultaneously encourage continuity and change, becoming part of the communication through which tradition is sustained and transformed (Flinterud 439).

The paper also draws upon Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Henry Jenkins's concept of convergence. Hall's approach is useful because a digital representation of folklore is never a transparent reproduction of the original cultural practice; selection, framing, language, sound, and visual design participate in the construction of meaning. Jenkins's concept of convergence helps explain how cultural material moves between media environments rather than remaining within one medium. A Tamil folk narrative can move from oral narration to performance, from performance to YouTube, and from YouTube to Instagram through selected clips. The tradition therefore becomes part of a network of interconnected media forms.

3. From Oral Narration to Digital Storytelling

Oral storytelling depends upon memory, voice, repetition, and interaction. The storyteller does not necessarily reproduce a fixed script but adapts the narrative according to audience and occasion. This flexibility is central to folklore because variation allows traditions to remain meaningful under changing circumstances. A village legend may be shortened for children, expanded for a festival audience, or modified by an individual narrator who incorporates personal experience. The story survives precisely because it can be retold. Digital media intensifies this process of variation. A traditional Tamil story may now exist in several YouTube versions, narrated by different creators and accompanied by different music, images, interpretations, or explanations. A single story may be presented as folklore, history, entertainment, horror, cultural education, or devotional material depending upon the creator's framing. The underlying narrative may remain recognizable while its communicative purpose changes.

The storyteller also becomes a digital creator. Traditional folklore often has collective or uncertain authorship, whereas digital platforms organize cultural production around identifiable channels and accounts. The person who narrates a traditional story becomes visible as the immediate source of the digital version. This can be beneficial because individual creators can document regional narratives, provide translations, and introduce younger audiences to traditions that may otherwise remain inaccessible. At the same time, the prominence of the creator can obscure the collective cultural history of the narrative. Digital storytelling therefore creates a layered form of authorship. The community provides the cultural material; the storyteller performs it; the creator records and edits it; the platform circulates it; and audiences reinterpret it. The final digital narrative is consequently neither wholly individual nor entirely collective.

4. Villupattu and the Transformation of Performance

Villupattu illustrates the transformation particularly clearly because it combines storytelling, music, rhythm, humour, and audience participation. The form is closely associated with the narration of stories and religious or cultural themes, and research on Tamil village traditions identifies Villupattu as one of the genres through which local myths and narratives are transmitted. (ResearchGate) Its cultural meaning therefore emerges through performance rather than through words alone.

In a live performance, the Villupattu artist responds to the audience. Repetition can be extended, humour can be adjusted, and explanatory passages can be developed according to audience reaction. The performance is consequently an event created through interaction. YouTube changes this relationship by introducing an audience that is geographically dispersed and temporally separated from the original performance. The performer may speak to a camera while the eventual viewers encounter the recording at different times.

The transformation produces both cultural possibilities and limitations. A recorded Villupattu performance can become a valuable digital record, enabling younger generations and geographically distant audiences to encounter the form. The viewer can pause, replay, and return to particular passages. A performance that was once temporary can acquire a persistent digital existence. Yet the recording cannot preserve the entire performance environment. Camera framing selects what the viewer sees; editing may remove sections; sound recording may alter the relationship between voice and surrounding atmosphere; and audience interaction may disappear from the final version. The digital recording therefore preserves the performance while simultaneously transforming it.

This tension is central to platform storytelling. Digital media increases accessibility while potentially reducing contextual knowledge. The viewer gains access to the performance but may lose access to the social circumstances that originally gave the performance meaning. Digital preservation should therefore not be confused with complete cultural preservation.

5. Therukoothu and the Digital Frame

Therukoothu demonstrates the importance of performance space. Tamil cultural documentation identifies it as a traditional folk dramatic form involving storytelling, music, acting, and community participation. Its significance is

therefore connected with the relationship between performers and the physical audience. The open performance environment allows spectators to experience not merely the narrative but also the collective atmosphere of the event. Digital recording changes this spatial relationship. The camera creates a new frame around the performance. A close shot can emphasize a performer's facial expression, costume, or gesture while excluding the surrounding audience. A distant shot can preserve the spatial arrangement but reduce visual detail. Editing can remove pauses and transitions, while sound recording can privilege dialogue or music over the surrounding environment.

The digital viewer consequently encounters a selective representation of Therukoothu rather than the complete performance event. This does not make the recording culturally insignificant. On the contrary, digital documentation can provide access to performances that would otherwise remain geographically restricted. It can also preserve details for researchers and future audiences. The important distinction is between recording and experience. A video can preserve evidence of a performance but cannot reproduce the complete social environment in which that performance occurred. The viewer may watch Therukoothu online without experiencing the communal, spatial, or ritual dimensions that accompanied the original event. The digital representation can therefore become simultaneously an archive and an interpretation.

6. Folk Tales, Legends, Proverbs, and Short-Form Culture

Not all Tamil folklore requires elaborate performance. Proverbs, riddles, village legends, supernatural stories, anecdotes, and everyday sayings are equally important forms of cultural transmission. Their adaptability makes them particularly suitable for digital media. A proverb can become an Instagram graphic; a riddle can become an interactive Reel; a village legend can become a narrated YouTube video; and a folk tale can be divided into several episodes. This transformation expands accessibility but also encourages compression. Traditional narratives may contain cultural references that require explanation, but short-form platforms encourage immediate communication. A long story can be reduced to its most dramatic episode. A proverb can circulate without its original social context. A village legend can be transformed into entertainment without sufficient attention to the community or place from which it originated. The resulting cultural form may be highly visible while becoming less contextual.

This is one of the central tensions of digital folklore. A tradition that was previously accessible primarily to a local community can now reach thousands of viewers, but many of those viewers may not possess the cultural knowledge required to interpret it in the same way as the original audience. The expansion of audience therefore produces both cultural opportunity and interpretive distance.

Digital creators can reduce this distance through contextualization. Information about the locality, community, history, performance occasion, language, or cultural significance of a narrative can accompany the digital presentation. Interviews with tradition bearers can further distinguish the cultural practice from the creator's own interpretation. Platform storytelling is therefore strongest when circulation is accompanied by context.

7. YouTube, Instagram, and the Fragmentation of Folklore

YouTube and Instagram should not be treated as identical environments. Their different formats encourage different narrative practices. YouTube accommodates longer performances, interviews, documentaries, complete songs, cultural explanations, and extended storytelling. Instagram, particularly through short-form video, encourages visual immediacy, rapid communication, and concise narrative units.

This distinction affects the representation of Tamil folklore. A complete Villupattu performance can retain duration and sequence on YouTube, while an Instagram Reel may isolate a particularly humorous, emotional, dramatic, or visually striking section. A long Therukoothu performance can be documented on YouTube but reduced to selected scenes on Instagram. A folk song can exist as a complete audiovisual performance on YouTube and as a short musical fragment on Instagram. The fragment can become more visible than the whole.

Such fragmentation is not necessarily destructive. A short clip may introduce an unfamiliar tradition to an audience that would never deliberately search for a complete performance. It may encourage viewers to seek the longer

recording. Instagram can therefore function as an entry point into broader cultural material. However, repeated exposure only to fragments may gradually reshape audience expectations. Viewers may come to associate folklore with short, visually striking moments rather than with extended narratives and communal performances. Platform culture therefore influences not only how folklore is presented but also how audiences learn to consume it.

This is where Jenkins's concept of convergence becomes important. "Cultural materials increasingly move between media, and audiences participate in their circulation" (Jenkins 79). Tamil folklore can therefore exist simultaneously as oral performance, YouTube recording, Instagram Reel, image, caption, music video, and discussion. The tradition becomes networked across media rather than confined to a single form.

"Enjoy Enjaami" and the Re-Narrativisation of Folk Culture

"Enjoy Enjaami" offers a particularly significant example because it demonstrates that digital folklore is not limited to recording older traditions. The Tamil song, released through the Maajja YouTube channel in 2021, combines folk-associated cultural elements with contemporary popular music and audiovisual production. Subasini and Arumugham examine the song in relation to Tamil folk culture, identity, ecological concerns, history, community, and cultural heritage, describing its hybrid relationship with Oppari and contemporary pop and hip-hop forms. The significance of the song lies in its transformation of inherited cultural resources into a new digital cultural production. It does not simply reproduce an earlier folk form. Instead, cultural memory is reorganized through contemporary music, performance, visual representation, and digital circulation. This process may be described as re-narrativisation. A cultural memory originating in one expressive environment is reconstructed within another. The connection with tradition remains, but the form, audience, aesthetics, and mode of circulation change.

The example demonstrates why the relationship between folklore and digital culture should not be understood only through the language of preservation. Digital media can become a site of cultural creation. Traditional materials can be combined with contemporary forms to produce narratives concerning identity, environment, history, labour, ancestry, and belonging. The song also illustrates the expansion of Tamil cultural material beyond a strictly local audience. Digital circulation allows cultural productions rooted in Tamil experience to reach audiences across geographical boundaries. The resulting interpretations may differ according to the viewer's cultural background, demonstrating once again that digital circulation expands both visibility and interpretive possibility.

8. Platform Storytelling and Cultural Visibility

The most significant difference between traditional oral transmission and platform storytelling may be the role of technological visibility. Oral narratives circulate through human relationships, while digital platforms introduce systems of search, recommendation, engagement, and algorithmic selection. Flinterud argues that, "algorithms participate in the production and transmission of folklore because they influence which expressions become visible and how users encounter them" (439).

This has important implications for Tamil folklore. A culturally significant tradition does not automatically become visible simply because it is uploaded. Its circulation can depend upon titles, thumbnails, captions, hashtags, audience interaction, and platform recommendations. Consequently, cultural importance and digital visibility do not necessarily correspond. A visually dramatic fragment may receive greater attention than a detailed documentation of a traditional practice. A popular creator may introduce a folk narrative to more viewers than a community archive. A short and emotionally immediate story may circulate more widely than a longer and more complex narrative. The platform therefore becomes a new cultural filter.

This does not mean that algorithms completely determine folklore. Human creators and audiences remain central to cultural transmission. However, algorithmic systems increasingly participate in the conditions through which contemporary folklore becomes discoverable. The study of digital Tamil folklore must consequently consider not only storytellers and audiences but also the technological structures that organize their interaction.

9. Towards Platform Storytelling

The concept of platform storytelling brings these observations together. It refers to the process through which inherited cultural narratives are performed, recorded, edited, represented, circulated, and reinterpreted within digital platforms. The concept emphasizes that the platform is part of the communicative environment rather than a neutral channel.

Platform storytelling is mediated because audiences encounter the narrative through technology. It is framed because cameras and editing determine what becomes visible. It is adaptive because storytellers modify their presentation according to digital conventions. It is networked because audiences extend beyond the original community. It is participatory because viewers can respond, share, and reinterpret. It is algorithmically conditioned because platform systems influence visibility. It is also convergent because cultural narratives move between oral performance, video, music, text, and social media.

The concept therefore allows Tamil folklore to be understood through continuity and transformation simultaneously. A Villupattu performance remains connected with an inherited tradition even when it becomes a YouTube recording. A Therukoothu performance retains its narrative and performative identity while its spatial context is altered by the camera. A village legend remains culturally recognizable while acquiring new visual and narrative forms online. “Enjoy Enjaami” demonstrates that inherited cultural memory can become the basis for an entirely new digital cultural production. Tamil folklore therefore survives in digital media not because it remains unchanged but because it continues to adapt.

10. Summation

The movement of Tamil folklore from oral storytelling to YouTube and Instagram represents a transformation in the conditions of cultural transmission. Tamil folk narratives, Villupattu, Therukoothu, proverbs, legends, folk songs, and contemporary folk-inspired productions demonstrate that digital media can extend the reach of cultural expression while simultaneously altering its form, context, audience, and meaning. The central argument of this paper is that Tamil folklore should not be understood online merely as archived tradition. YouTube and Instagram participate in the process through which folklore is re-narrated. The camera changes the performance frame; editing changes duration; short-form media encourages fragmentation; individual creators become visible as cultural mediators; networked audiences bring different interpretive perspectives; and algorithms influence cultural visibility.

The transformation nevertheless creates significant opportunities. Digital platforms can document performances, connect younger generations with cultural traditions, reach Tamil audiences across geographical boundaries, and provide new spaces for creative cultural production. “Enjoy Enjaami” demonstrates particularly clearly how inherited folk-cultural resources can be reorganized into contemporary digital forms rather than simply reproduced. The concept of platform storytelling therefore offers a useful framework for studying the contemporary life of Tamil folklore. It recognizes that folklore remains rooted in cultural memory while acknowledging that its forms of transmission are changing. The movement from oral narration to digital storytelling is not a movement from tradition to its disappearance. It is a movement from one communicative environment to another. Tamil folklore in the digital age consequently exists through an ongoing negotiation among tradition, technology, creators, audiences, and platforms. The future study of Tamil folklore must therefore examine not only what communities continue to remember and narrate but also how digital environments determine the forms through which those narratives become visible, accessible, and meaningful.

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