
The Art of Storytelling and cultural memory: A Reading of “A Tale of Paattee Making Vada”

Dr. BR Alamelu

Assistant Professor

Centre for English Studies

School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies

Jawaharlal Nehru University

New Delhi, India

Abstract

Oral traditions contribute significantly to the transmission of knowledge, values, and collective memories across generations. Storytelling, as a performative and interactive art form, not only entertains but also educates, preserves cultural heritage, and fosters creativity among listeners. This paper examines the significance of storytelling as a vital component of oral culture through an analysis of four versions of the Tamil folktale A Tale of Paattee Making Vada. It explores how a single folktale can exist in multiple versions, generating diverse meanings depending on the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which it is narrated.

Drawing on the concept of the polythetic network, the paper demonstrates the fluid and adaptive nature of oral narratives. It highlights how recurring motifs are modified, expanded, or reinterpreted to communicate different moral lessons and cultural values. These four variations reveal the capacity of oral traditions to accommodate evolving cultural realities while retaining a recognizable narrative framework.

The paper also examines the impact of print culture and digital technologies on oral storytelling. Although the transformation of folktales into written and digital forms has enhanced their accessibility and wider circulation, it has also altered the dynamics of oral performance and transmission. The paper concludes that storytelling continues to function as a powerful medium of cultural transmission, and that its polythetic nature ensures its enduring relevance in contemporary society despite the growing influence of mass media and cyberspace.

Keywords: *Oral Tradition; Storytelling, Tamil Folklore, Polythetic Network; Cultural Transmission*

“Culture or civilisation, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor 11). This wide understanding of culture has consequently been radiated by contemporary scholars and institutions. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation UNESCO (2002) described culture as “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.” Such formulation gives a wider scope for culture to operate in a social system where a multiplicity of theories and policies are being produced. It also means that the culture has a multiplicitous nature wherein, it can include every sphere of society like scientific, spiritual, intellectual, oral, folklore, and so on. In this regard, oral and folk culture hold prime importance and these have been focused upon in this paper.

Oral tradition obtains a central position among the diverse forms through which culture is fostered and transmitted. Way before the emanation of print culture, people relied upon oral narratives, myths, legends, and folk tales to conserve shared memories and commemorate social values. Oral tradition or Oral Culture may be widely understood as a way of transmitting history, literature or law through spoken performance across generations. Many literary bodies that are now available in written form have originated with oral culture. Classical example including the Homeric epic poetry of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and the Tamil epics *Cilappathigaram* by Ilanko Atigal, *Manimekalai* by Seethalai Sattanar and *Periya puranam* by Sekkizhar could be such examples which combined the aspects of oral history and oral culture before being eventually set down in writing. Oral narratives are not fixed entities unlike written text; they evolve with continual modification as they shift from one storyteller, audience and cultural context to another. This fluidity grants narrative to accommodate new perspectives, and diverse interpretive possibilities. Consequently, Oral culture can be flexible enough to be identified with, or sequentially capable of being used as both a tool and an implement.

This paper examines the importance of storytelling in oral tradition through a comparative analysis of four versions of Tamil folk narrative “A Tale of Paattee Making Vada.” The tale broadly widespread across South India in different linguistic and cultural forms provides a useful illustration of the adaptive nature of folk narratives. This Paper delves into four versions of Tamil folk tale “A Tale of Paattee Making Vada” to exhibit how oral narratives bring in multiple meanings through a polythetic practice of reinterpretation and adaptation. Drawing upon the concept of polythetic networks, the paper argues that the tale does not acquire a monolithic stable meaning or narrative structure. Rather, its multiple versions create various cultural interpretations through processes of reinterpretation and adaption. By analysing these variations, the paper validates how oral storytelling performs as dynamic cultural practice that continuously negotiates between tradition and change, while persevering its relevance across generations.

Storytelling plays as a vital social practice through which communities negotiate meanings, share experience and reinforce collective identities. Murugabupathy, a Tamil folklorist and a writer, argues that storytelling is an art form which improves the qualities such as concentration, interaction, communicative tendency, vocabulary, observation, imagination, thinking, memory, and reasoning which add to the creative power of a listener, either a child or an adult. Beyond its pedagogical function, Storytelling enables communities to preserve and transmit social values, and cultural knowledge across generations. A story may be perceived

as a narrative representation of real or imagined within a specific structure of narrative with a specific style and set of characters, and, which includes a sense of completeness. However, stories act as more than simple narratives. They perform as repositories of shared experience and cultural wisdom. Oral tradition also simultaneously creates what may be called meta-narrative, stories about storytelling itself, which mirrors communities' awareness of narrative as a cultural practice. Oral storytelling is essentially performative and interactive. The significance of storytelling originates not only from the idea of storytelling but also from the process through which they are communicated. Oral narratives generate through the dynamic relationship between storyteller and audience unlike written text which often remain rigid in form. "Storytelling is, by its nature, personal, interpretive, and uniquely human" (Chesin 213). Direct interaction between the storyteller and the listener is an essential component of the oral storytelling tradition. While the teller narrates the events, the audience responds both to his vocal expressions and figurative actions. In the whole process, the teller has to make the right use of non-verbal feedback to immediately, spontaneously and improvisationally adjust the wording, tone and the pace to better meet the needs of the audience.

Storytelling is, by design, a co-creative process. In oral tradition of storytelling, the listener is not a passive spectator like a Television viewer who views and records the designed events on the screen. Unlike a Television viewer, the listener in oral tradition, based on the artistic performance of the teller and his own understanding of the events in terms of his own beliefs and experiences, creates pictures and paints the narrated story in his conscious mind. One may say that neither the efficiency of a storyteller nor the logical understanding of the listener alone could be sufficient enough for a story to be relished. The substance of a story and its moral largely depend upon the way not only how it is portrayed but also the series of versions in which it is presented. Here, it is important to note the vital role played by versions of stories. What does the word version mean? Isn't the word version itself political in nature? What could be the reason to present the same story in different versions? A series of such questions may arise in one's mind. The adaptability of oral narrative is most evident in the creation of different versions of the same story. As stories travel across different regions, language and historical periods, they undergo a process of reinterpretation. While the central narrative framework may remain recognisable. Individual motifs, character, settings and moral lessons often shape in response to local culture conditions. Narrative variation should therefore not be perceived as a deviation from an original text but as an inherent characteristic of oral tradition.

This fluidity may be understood through Marshall McLuhan's distinction between "hot" and "cool" media. McLuhan discusses forms of media that possess an interactive quality. He considers such media ideal because they offer the receiver, audience, or reader the opportunity for active participation and intervention in the knowledge they disseminate. This participatory process facilitates the democratization of knowledge and its modes of transmission. If storytelling is understood as a medium, then McLuhan's concept of "cool" media aptly applies to it.

The existence of different versions of the same story indicates that it has been revisited, reinterpreted, and reformulated across different regions and historical periods, much as cool media assume multiple forms. This suggests that stories create space for participation, reinterpretation, and reformulation. As McLuhan observes, "hot media are low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience" (McLuhan 24). This participatory quality is intrinsic to the art of storytelling.

The existence of multiple versions of a single story gives rise to a variety of themes and motifs. Such narratives may be understood as belonging to what has been described as polythetic networks. The term polythetic means "multiply arranged" (Ferroluzzi 109). It is important to note that the very concept of a motif has fuzzy edges; it may be expanded, modified, or abbreviated depending on the context. The term polythetic also signifies the pluralistic and polymorphous nature of a story and its various versions. This polythetic quality is particularly characteristic of oral folk traditions in general and Tamil oral folk traditions in particular. From this perspective, folk narratives do not possess a single fixed structure or definitive meaning. Rather, they comprise clusters of recurring motifs that may be modified, expanded, abbreviated, or omitted in different social, cultural, and historical contexts.

The four versions of "A Tale of Pattee Making Vada" highlights that oral narratives do not perform as rigid textual entities but as dynamic structures of meaning created through variation. Across all four versions, certain narrative parts stayed stable: the presence of Paatee, the Vada as a cultural object, and the communication between human and non-human agents such as the fox and the crow. These continuous parts constitute narrative recurring. However, the meanings inclined to these elements evolved significantly across variation. The crow, for instance, acts alternately as a victim of deception (Version A), a vigilant agent of intelligence (Version B), a peripheral figure in a human-centred conflict (Version C), and a background presence within an ethical narrative of compassion (Version D). This highlights that oral narrative stability lies not in rigid meaning but in the persistence of recognisable motifs that remain open to reinterpretation.

Versions A and B mostly operate within a classical didactic framework. Version A creates a moral economy based on reformatory justice, where deception is punished through reciprocal deception. Version B revamp this structure by prioritising intelligence by shifting the moral importance from punishment to strategic awareness. In contrast, version C and D go beyond normal moral binaries. Version C introduces ambiguity through the motif of the "plastic vada," that disturb the natural order of the folk settings and produce misrecognition and displaced blame. The moral framework here centred on epistemic instability rather on justice or intelligence. Further, Version D foregrounds compassion as an ethical principle by displacing moral antagonism where the Pattee's actions are guided by care rather than conflict. These shifts altogether highlight that oral narratives do not transmit a particular but create an umbrella filled with ethical interpretations varying on contextual adaptation.

The evolution of motifs across different versions illustrates the adaptive capability of oral culture. The crow and fox motifs, broadly introduced in south Asian and global folklore traditions, acts as a flexible narrative device capable of expressing various social issues.

The polythetic network created a new awareness in Tamil literature in general and Tamil oral folk literature in particular. Applying polythetic notion to Tamil folk stories means

No story has either a stable plot or stable boundaries, and that any motif may be combined with any other motif (although every combination is equally probable). Some combinations make a better story than others and some motifs are more common than others. The fact that certain motifs occur more frequently does not imply that these must have been

present in an original story, but rather that they enjoy great favour either cross-culturally or within a given culture. (Ferroluzzi 127)

For instance, the four versions of the story discussed above are found across the major South Indian languages—Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. While it cannot be claimed that every version is shared across all these linguistic traditions, Versions (A) and (B) are widely prevalent. The circulation of the same story across different regions, dialects, and languages underscores its cross-cultural significance and demonstrates the dynamic nature of oral transmission.

The motifs that constitute a polythetic network possess what may be described as "fuzzy edges," enabling them to recur, evolve, and be reinterpreted in diverse social and cultural contexts. This recurring and adaptive quality allows oral narratives to transmit both pragmatic and experiential knowledge across generations. For example, whereas Versions (A) and (B) primarily revolve around the theme of cunningness, the later versions broaden the narrative's moral and thematic scope by incorporating ideas such as misjudgment, illusion, innocence, humanity, kindness, and compassion towards fellow beings.

It is difficult to determine the precise historical origin of oral folktales. Since folklore is generally regarded as being as ancient as human speech itself, the exact period in which the tale under discussion, "A Tale of Paattee Making Vada," originated cannot be specified. Nevertheless, it is widely believed that the tale has been transmitted orally for several centuries. Folklorists and writers who have discussed this story suggest that the relative period of particular versions may be inferred from certain symbolic elements embedded within them.

For instance, the appearance of the "plastic vada" in Version (C) suggests that this variant must have emerged during the age of plastic. Although this observation appears convincing, defining the "age of plastic" is itself not without difficulty. Roland Barthes, who extensively theorized the significance of everyday materials in modern culture, provides a useful framework in this regard. As he observes, "The whole world can be plasticised, and even life itself since, we are told, they are beginning to have many plastic aortas" (Barthes 99). This suggests that plastic, which came to occupy an important place in everyday life, also found its way into oral folklore, shaping newer versions of traditional narratives.

Tracing the temporality of such narratives may, therefore, reveal further versions of the tale and additional polythetic motifs generated through the dynamic processes of oral transmission. An important point to note, however, is that Version (D) appeared in the Tamil weekly magazine *Ananda Vikatan* in September 2006, whereas the other three versions continue to circulate primarily through oral narration.

The moral conveyed in Version (D) suggests that the narrative itself may be much older than its published form. Rather than representing a newly created story, it appears to be an oral narrative that has been adapted into a different medium through print. Consequently, the relatively recent publication of this version cannot, by itself, be taken as evidence of its historical origin, as the story may have circulated orally for a considerable period before being documented.

It may also be argued that the publication of the story in print was shaped by capitalist motives, with the article functioning, at least in part, as a strategy for attracting readership and publicity. From this perspective, the advanced industrial society appropriates a mode of

narration that originated within a pre-industrial oral culture, recontextualizing it within the logic of print capitalism.

The intervention of mass media and cybernetics in oral tradition in general, and storytelling in particular, has contributed to a gradual decline in certain creative and participatory practices that traditionally characterized oral communities. Storytelling, which accommodates multiple perspectives and encourages active participation by both the storyteller and the listener, has increasingly been challenged by the growing influence of technology, mass media, and cyberspace.

Although the "virtual world," as Shawn P. Wilbur argues in "An Archaeology of Cyberspaces: Virtuality, Community, Identity," offers new possibilities for communication and interaction through cyberspace, participation in the virtual world depends upon access to physical space, technological infrastructure, and varying degrees of economic capital, resources that are not equally available to all sections of society. Storytelling, by contrast, represents lived social realities and serves as an accessible medium for transmitting knowledge. It also facilitates the democratization of knowledge by allowing themes, motifs, settings, and modes of narration to be adapted according to the context and the interaction between the storyteller and the audience. One must remember that oral literature functioned, in many ways, as a form of mass media in pre-industrial societies, disseminating systems of knowledge as well as cultural and ethical values.

Michael Benedict, who has written extensively on cyberspace and advocated its development, remarks: "Let us begin to face the perplexities involved in making the unimaginable imaginable and the imaginable real. Let the ancient project that is cyberspace continue" (Benedict 43). Benedict's observation suggests that cyberspace may be understood as the latest stage in humanity's long history of developing increasingly sophisticated modes of communication rather than as an entirely unprecedented phenomenon. Yet, the emergence of cyberspace does not imply the disappearance of older forms of communication. Traditional media continue to coexist with digital technologies. The concern arises when newer media diminish or marginalize older forms of cultural transmission, particularly oral traditions, which play a vital role in collective cultural formation and in cultivating linguistic creativity and imagination among younger generations.

Storytelling has long served as a means of teaching, explaining, and entertaining, which is why it occupied an important place in everyday life. Multimedia storytelling, however, differs significantly from traditional oral storytelling. Since we are now familiar with a wide range of media, including mass media and cybernetics, the transformation of storytelling may be illustrated through the medium of writing. The four versions of "A Tale of Paattee Making Vada" discussed in this paper, for instance, belong primarily to the oral tradition. They have been translated from Tamil and presented here solely for the purpose of analysis.

The tale undergoes two significant transformations: first, through translation from Tamil into English, and second, through its conversion from an oral to a written form. These processes enable the folktale to enter a wider polythetic network. By extending its circulation beyond its original linguistic and cultural context, the story reaches a broader readership, facilitating cross-cultural transmission and inviting fresh interpretations and creative interventions. At the same

time, however, such dissemination distances the tale from its source culture. Consequently, elements such as humour, irony, sarcasm, metaphor, and other culturally embedded nuances may be lost, transformed, or replaced by equivalent expressive features in the receiving language and culture.

Among the four versions discussed, Version (D) contributes most significantly to the expansion of the tale's polythetic network by foregrounding a more universal motif. It also serves as an illustration of how a narrative may gradually lose aspects of its original cultural specificity as it is adapted into different media and cultural contexts. During this process, culturally specific symbols—including food, dress, and other material markers—are often replaced by culturally familiar equivalents. For example, in the Hindi-speaking regions, the South Indian food item vada is frequently replaced by roti or puri in versions of the same folktale.

Thus, every culture, in its own way, seeks to appropriate and reinterpret the art of storytelling. This process of cultural subjectivization is itself pluralistic, made possible by the multimedial nature of storytelling and by the continual emergence of multiple versions of the same narrative.

The scarcity of food and the experience of poverty are metaphorically represented through the fox and the crow struggling over the vada, attempting to outwit one another, or through Paattee driving away the crows. These recurring narrative situations may therefore be interpreted through the lens of the "survival of the fittest," where survival is achieved not merely through physical strength but also through intelligence, adaptability, and social conduct.

Paattee, who functions as an important cultural figure in Tamil and, more broadly, South Indian folk traditions, is consistently portrayed as a wise, self-reliant, and resourceful woman. In the tale discussed above, as well as in another Tamil oral folktale, "Moru Vikkira Paattee" ("Paattee Selling Buttermilk"), she is engaged in small-scale trade as a means of livelihood. Her economic independence and practical wisdom further reinforce the motif of survival, while simultaneously reflecting the respect accorded to elderly women within the cultural imagination of the region.

This is not to suggest that the evolution of survival strategies constitutes the sole purpose of storytelling in folk culture. Rather, the intention is to identify survival as one of the recurring thematic threads that runs through these narratives and connects diverse folk traditions across languages and cultures.

In conclusion, it is worth recalling Gerald Chesin's observation that "a story told is more spontaneous than one read, however well read" (212). While this paper does not argue that orality is the sole surviving mode of cultural transmission, it has sought to conceptualize the oral form of storytelling through the "polythetic" network of Tamil oral narratives. Such a framework demonstrates that oral traditions are neither static nor derivative; rather, they remain dynamic, adaptive, and inherently dialogic. The multiple versions of a single narrative reveal the polythetic nature of oral storytelling, where variation is not a sign of textual instability but of cultural vitality, enabling stories to respond to changing historical, social, and ethical contexts while retaining a recognizable narrative core. In this sense, the coexistence of multiple variants reflects the collective agency of storytellers and audiences in continually recreating cultural memory.

Furthermore, the persistence of oral storytelling in an age shaped by mass media, digital technologies, and the computerization of cultural practices underscores the resilience of orality as a mode of knowing and remembering. As scholars of orality have long argued, oral traditions are not eclipsed by literacy or digitality; rather, they evolve by negotiating new media while continuing to sustain communal identities, ethical values, and lived histories. The Tamil oral narratives examined here thus testify to the enduring significance of storytelling as a performative cultural practice that mediates between continuity and change, memory and innovation, local knowledge and contemporary realities. Far from being a relic of the past, the oral story remains an indispensable medium through which cultures imagine, preserve, and renew themselves.

Appendix

I, Dr. B.R. Alamelu has translated all the short stories.

“A Tale of Paattee making Vada” (Version-A)

Long long ago, there was an old paattee who prepared delicious Vadas and sold them to her customers. She used to sit under the shadow of a tree and carry on her daily business. One day there flew a crow on to the tree under which the paattee was cooking Vadas and doing her routine transactions. It began watching the paattee attentively, looking for a good chance. When paattee was fully involved in cooking vadas, mixing the dough, pouring oil in and taking boiled vadas out of the pan, the crow flew down, picked up one vada from the vessel and flew back up again. The crow was very happy for its cunning wish to be fulfilled without any trouble. When the crow was about to eat the stolen vada, it heard the gay voice of a cunning fox from under the tree. The crow shook its head in a happy mood. The fox said, “Ah, Ah, after a long time, I’ve got a thrilling chance to listen to your sweet and lovely singing!” The crow was more excited, and without any further thought, began singing “Caw, Caw, Caw.” The stolen vada dropped down, and the fox got what it was playing the whole game for.

Moral of the story: “the one who cheats are cheated in return.”

Version (B)

Long long ago, there was an old paattee preparing delicious Vadas and selling them to her customers. She used to sit under the shadow of a tree and carry on her daily business. One day there flew a crow on to the tree under which the paattee was cooking Vadas and doing her routine transactions. It began watching the paattee carefully for a good chance. When paattee was fully involved in cooking vadas, mixing the dough, pouring oil in and taking boiled vadas out of the pan, the crow flew down, picked up one vada from the vessel and flew back up again. The crow was very happy for its cunning wish to be fulfilled without any trouble. When the crow was about to eat the stolen vada, it heard a gay voice of a cunning fox from under the tree. The crow shook its head in a happy mood. The fox said, “Ah, Ah, after a long time I’ve got a thrilling chance to listen to your sweet and lovely singing!” knowing well the cunningness of the fox, the crow took vada out of its mouth and put it between the two legs and then began singing, “Caw, Caw, Caw!” The fox was unhappy for its cunningness being noticed and went away disappointed.

Moral of the story: “one’s cunningness cannot defeat others, rather, leads to their own defeat.”

Version (C)

Long long ago, there was an old paattee preparing delicious Vadas and selling them to her customers. She used to sit under the shadow of a tree and carry on her daily business. There came a fox and found a crow keenly watching the Paattee and vadas. With a view to playing a trick and deceiving the crow, the Fox brought a plastic Vada of the same shape and colour, mixed it with the cooked ones and left. Completely unaware of the trick played by fox, paattee mixed the plastic vada and sold it to a customer. Shocked to find a plastic vada, the customer came back to paattee in anger and began fighting. She replaced the plastic vada and sent away

the customer. Surprised by the unexpected event, Paattee looked all around and finally found a crow sitting on the tree, and immediately doubted that it was none but the crow who could have done such a thing. She tried to chase but failed to catch the crow.

Moral of the story: People will always try to trap you. So be careful.

Version (D)

Long long ago, there was an old paattee preparing delicious Vadas and selling them to her customers. She used to sit under the shadow of a tree and carry on her daily business. One day the paattee was busy with all her customers and a flock of crows was waiting to pick up the vadas. Paattee was very attentive that day, carefully attending the busy customers and shooing away the rushing flock of crows. After a while, the Paattee put a few vadas on a plate for crows calling them, “Caw, Caw, Caw.” A customer who has been watching the Paattee for a long time, questioned, “Paattee! You shooed all the crows when they were approaching you, but you are now calling them on your own and giving them what they needed, may I know the difference?” Paattee replied, “yes, your observation is quite right! when they were approaching me, these vadas were very hot; I was afraid they could have been harmed, and now these vadas have become cool enough for them to eat.”

Moral of the story: narrated with a definite theme, this version of the story emphasizes on the kindness of Paattee and teaches all mankind to be humane in actions.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers, Hill and Wang, 1972.
- Benedikt, Michael, editor. *Cyberspace: First Steps*. MIT Press, 1991.
- Chesin, Gerald A. "Storytelling and Storyreading." *Peabody Journal of Education*, vol. 43, no. 4, Jan. 1966, pp. 212–214.
- Chesin, Gerald. "Why Storytelling Matters." *Storytelling Magazine*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2002, pp. 212–13.
- Ferraiuolo, Augusto. *The Myth of the Thousand Cows: A Polythetic Analysis of Folktales*. Peter Lang, 2007.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill, 1964.
- Murugabupathy. *Kadhai Sollum Kalai*. Chennai, 2006.
- Tylor, Edward Burnett. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*. Vol. 1, John Murray, 1871.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. UNESCO, 2002.

Author's bio-note

Dr. BR Alamelu is Assistant Professor at the Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. She previously taught at Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi, where she founded and coordinated the Centre for Disability Studies. Her teaching, research, conference presentations, and publications span disability studies, gender and culture, diaspora studies, transculturalism, and the literatures of marginalized communities across America, Africa, Australia, Canada, and India. She is currently the Principal Investigator of an ICSSR-funded Major Research Project titled, “Cultural Lives of Women with Visual Disabilities: A Cross-Regional Study.”
