



## Challenges in Translating Moroccan Oral Tradition: The Case of Folktales from the Region of Abdelghaya Souahel

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**Abstract**

This study examines some challenges encountered in translating Moroccan folktales from the region of Abdelghaya Souahel into English, focusing on linguistic and cultural problems. In this regard, Moroccan oral tradition, including folktales, plays a pivotal role in preserving cultural identity and transmitting community values. However, translating these narratives involves addressing dialect variation, cultural symbolism, structural differences, and some performative aspects that form an integral part of oral storytelling. Through a cultural and linguistic analysis of ten folktales collected from the region, this study identifies some specific translation challenges and proposes strategies to preserve the authenticity of the stories while making them accessible to a broader audience. By addressing these challenges, this study contributes to a broader discourse on the preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage through translation.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Oral tradition is a fundamental aspect of cultural heritage, encompassing various forms of popular arts, including folk songs, proverbs and folktales passed down from one generation to another. This form of cultural expression is significant in societies where popular arts play a vital role in preserving and communicating community identity and historical experiences. In this regard, oral tradition encompasses both verbal and non-verbal traditions of ordinary and uneducated people (Maliki, 2021). Despite lacking formal education, those people possess a wealth of knowledge and cultural wisdom conveyed through word of mouth.

It is worth noting that oral tradition has undergone a significant shift, moving from an exotic field to a major area of interest. As a matter of fact, the perception of oral tradition has shifted from being negative and exotic and has grown to become a field of scientific interest. In this regard, Anthropologists and historians regard oral tradition as the primary medium of expression and communication for non-literate cultures, which means that it is conceptualized as a distinct and important method for these cultures to express their social and cultural thoughts, emphasizing its role in conveying and preserving the community's values and

knowledge. Historically, Colonialists and Christian missionaries explored oral traditions as a way to understand what they considered "primitive" societies. Their goal was to use this understanding to convert these communities to Christianity and to impose their own cultural values. By learning about these societies through their oral traditions, the colonialists aimed to facilitate their efforts to spread their religion and "civilize" the people in these communities according to their own standards and beliefs (Bandia, 2018, p. 125).

Building on the understanding of oral tradition as a pivotal aspect of cultures, Morocco, with its diverse ethnic groups and historical influences, presents a number of unique folktales that can serve as a means of educating younger generations about the past, reinforcing communal bonds, and maintaining collective identity. In fact, folktales form a fundamental basis of human learning and teaching. They serve as an entry point into indigenous cultures and languages (Ida Bagus & Dewa Geden, 2018).

What remains now of the oral traditions of Morocco, and perhaps of many other Moroccan cities, is being preserved by a small group of elderly people, particularly elderly women, who are entrusted with the role of narrating and transmitting oral tradition (Rahmouni, 2014). These narrators occupy a unique status within their communities because of their remarkable verbal skills and exceptional memory. A significant portion of the oral tradition they preserve includes hyperbolic legends where reality blends with myth (Fadil, 2018). Such traditions offer deep insights into human existence and the fundamental principles we uphold, as they highlight the close relationship between humans and nature (Mahato, 2024). At this point, translation, as a means of cross-cultural communication, plays a crucial role in making Moroccan oral tradition, especially folktales, accessible to a wider audience. However, the process of translation is not easy as long as preserving Moroccan identity is concerned.

Accordingly, the purpose of the study is to highlight the significance of folktales as being part and parcel of Moroccan cultural identity. The study also tries to shed light on the most common challenges related to the translation of some Moroccan folktales, specifically from the region of Abdelghaya Souahel, while it proposes some strategies to overcome these challenges.

This study seeks to answer these two major questions:

1. What are the main linguistic and cultural challenges encountered when translating Moroccan folktales from the Abdelghaya Souahel region into English?
2. What strategies can be employed to overcome these challenges?

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **2.1. Folktales as an Integral Part of Moroccan Oral Tradition**

Throughout history, oral tradition has always been proven to be a culturally unique mode of communication wherein knowledge, art and cultural ideas are received and thus preserved orally from one generation to another. Oral tradition has become a domain of great interest to scholars of different disciplines of knowledge.

Interestingly, old people hold a high position in society when it comes to conserving oral tradition, and particularly telling stories. Their tales are deemed to be a powerful educational tool for disseminating wisdom and sparking knowledge. These old people are seen as wise and repeaters of the past (Bauman, 1992). Moroccan grandmothers, in this regard, are seen as

teachers of traditional knowledge. The oral performance of these women can be seen as an answer back to the widespread belief in Morocco and the Arab world, in general, that everything that women tell is unofficial oral literature and therefore low and insignificant (Rahmouni, 2014).

Moroccan folktales hold significant information that provides a deeper understanding of people's traditions, rituals, and beliefs. Throughout their storytelling, the narrator regularly mentions and hints at common activities, ceremonial practices, and famous characters or figures. (Maliki, 2021, p. 50). In fact, all cultural elements which incarnate the accumulated experience of a society, including the beliefs of society, language, philosophy, dance, art, music and manners could be reflected in oral tradition (Stavrou, 2015, p. 529). Through the spoken word, the identity of a population could be transmitted from one generation to another. Oral tradition, thus, acts as a bond that strengthens both cultural and social ties, bridging the past and the present and connecting different generations (Fiorio, 2006, p. 68).

It should be noted that the attributes of folklore demonstrate how Moroccan oral traditions, including folktales, are meaningful enough to be laden with cultural identity. For instance, rurality, as an attribute of folklore, shows how people's close contact with nature in villages is considered as the source of their myth and poetry. The experience of human being with nature makes their myths and tales full of experienced events with the open space of wilderness. Besides rurality, irrationality is another attribute in folklore which reveals how people who tell myths, for example, are influenced by ghosts and demons, fairies and goblins. This attribute indicates the wide imagination of the folks. Traditionality, as another significant attribute, is also reflected in folklore through traditional values, beliefs and views which have been passed on from generation to generation (Ben Amos, 1983, pp. 1-2).

Therefore, Moroccan folktales are culturally rich, embodying rurality, irrationality, and traditionality. In this respect, Moroccan folktales capture rural life, highlighting humans' connection with nature, which influences their myths and poetry. These tales are often infused with irrational elements, featuring ghosts, demons, fairies, and omens, reflecting the wide imagination of the people. Additionally, traditional values and beliefs are passed down through generations, preserving the cultural identity within these stories.

## **2.2. Translation as a Means of Preserving Oral Tradition**

Within the realm of orality, translation is linked to two main aspects. The first is about transcribing oral narratives into written form, highlighting the major role writing plays in the preservation of oral traditions. The second aspect involves the translation of oral traditions, such as folktales, from one language to another.

As a matter of fact, oral tradition necessitates a form of continuity, and in this regard, writing introduces a sense of permanence within the text, extending beyond individual memory (Soffer, 2016, p. 3). Without the medium of writing, words lack a tangible visual presence, even when referring to visual objects. Instead, they remain ephemeral sounds that can be recalled but not visually accessed. So, writing provides a focal point and leaves a trace, enabling words to transcend the immediate auditory experience and become enduring symbols that can be accessed and interpreted across time and space. In essence, writing has a major impact in

transforming the nature of language from transient sounds to tangible, retrievable symbols with lasting significance (Ong, 1982, p. 31).

As long as oral tradition is concerned, one has to acknowledge that preserving the authenticity of the oral text is of paramount importance. Indeed, every spoken word reflects part of the teller's identity and culture. Therefore, while rendering the oral text into written form, one should try to capture the original text without modifying or altering the oral text to the point of falling in mistranslation.

In the process of preserving oral tradition, one might start with a transcription of the oral text before the process of translation. This involves converting an audio recording into written words. The transcription closely follows the original oral text, capturing every word. It also records the narrator's gestures, moral judgments, complaints, and explanations. These elements are essential as they contribute to the unique value and characteristics of the oral tradition. After the stage of transcription, comes the stage of preserving the oral text through the process of translation. This process requires being accurate and faithful to the original text, as well as transmitting the speaker's communicative intentions. However, endeavoring to preserve the oral lore through being literal to the original text is quite difficult simply because the original belongs to the oral code while the translation belongs to the written one. There are also other problems like translatable vs untranslatable (Rahmouni, 2014, pp. 18-19-29).

Given these challenges, the translator is responsible to justify all translation choices. Every element, whether it is a word, idiom, grammatical structure, or emphasis, must be accounted for. The translator should be prepared to explain why they chose a direct translation, an adapted version, or opted to omit something entirely, ensuring their decisions can withstand scrutiny if questioned (Newmark, 1988, p. 111).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study deals with some challenges related to translating Moroccan oral tradition, with a focus on folktales from the region of Abdelghaya Souahel. These challenges are based on ten translated folktales collected from the region of Abdelghaya Souahel, which is my place of origin. It is worth noting that this rural commune is situated in Al Hoceïma Province, in the Rif Mountains in Morocco. The ten folktales were collected from two tribes in the region. Six folktales; "The Flower", "The Boy and the Ogress", "The Ogress", "The Seven Apples", "The Sieve" and "The Wolf and the Hedgehog" were collected from the tribe of Azarmezdi to which I belong, whereas the other four ones; "Aisha the Cross-Eyed Girl", "The Seven Girls", "The Sultan" and "The Twins" were collected from Bni Hassan, the tribe where my mother was born. The six storytellers, who are my mother Rahma, Fatima, Njoud, Rabia, Daouia and Yamna, showed an immense enthusiasm, passion and happiness in telling stories once they heard of this study. Since safeguarding authenticity in oral tradition is quite important, the recorded folktales were first written in their vernacular language, and then translated into English. However, translating the collected folktales is not an easy process due to several linguistic and cultural challenges. These challenges stem from the unique characteristics of the oral narratives and the cultural context in which they originate. In fact, oral traditions often contain cultural references, and idiomatic expressions that may not directly be translated into another language like English. These elements are part and parcel of the local culture and context of Abdelghaya Souahel, making accurate translation crucial for preserving the

authenticity and meaning of the folktales. So, cultural and linguistic analysis is adopted in this study since it helps identify certain challenges in the translation process. By understanding the differences of both the source and target languages and cultures, translators can anticipate potential difficulties.

## **4. RESULTS**

The process of translating the ten folktales uncovered different linguistic and cultural challenges. These challenges can be categorized into four areas:

### **4.1. Dialect and language variation**

Moroccan oral traditions are often conveyed in regional dialects or vernaculars that may not have standardized written forms, making accurate translation more challenging. In this context, the collected folktales are narrated in the regional dialect of Abdelghaya Souahel. It is noteworthy that the dialect used in the region is close to the one spoken in northern Morocco. This dialect has unique vocabulary, phrases, and idiomatic expressions that do not have direct equivalents in English. Moreover, certain expressions and idioms might lose their meanings when translated directly into English.

The term “*msaltk*” for example is a very unique one. It is very present in the collected tales as it takes place in the beginning of the story. When the people of the region would like to tell a story, they start with “*msaltk*” as an indication to “once upon a time”. This unique term was, and still is, a signal for the beginning of magical hours of storytelling. The power of “*msaltk*” lies in its ability to create an immediate connection between the storyteller and the audience, especially children. It is a term that evokes nostalgia and the collective memory of the community. As the storyteller utters this word, listeners of all ages are transported to a shared space of imagination and wonder. In the translated versions, “*msaltk*” was kept as it is, while providing a footnote explaining the cultural connotation of the term.

Besides “*msaltk*”, there are many other examples which mark the regional identity of Abdelghaya Souahel. The following are some of these examples along with their translation:

“*Lferkhin*”: Children

“*Delma*”: Oak

“*Zinga*”: Piece of tin

“*Tonna*”: Barrel

“*Dash*”: What

So, this dialect not only adds richness and authenticity to the stories, but also poses challenges for translation into English.

### **4.2. Symbolism and metaphors**

Symbolism and metaphors play a crucial role in folktales across cultures as they often serve to convey moral lessons, cultural values and insights into human nature. However, translating

symbolism and metaphors while maintaining their intended impact and resonance is challenging due to the culturally specific meanings they carry.

In the story of “The Seven Apples”, symbolism and metaphors can be identified. The seven apples symbolize daughters, with the number seven often representing a significant cycle in many cultures. The youngest daughter's apple changing while the father is on his pilgrimage indicates a harm befalling her. This change signals to the father that his family is in danger, reinforcing the idea of familial bonds and intuition. Additionally, the father's pilgrimage represents a journey of faith and duty, leaving his daughters vulnerable and testing their ability to adhere to his guidance. This journey can be seen as a metaphor for life's challenges where individuals must rely on wisdom and instructions passed down by their elders to face and overcome dangers.

Thus, translating such symbols and metaphors is difficult because their meanings are often culturally specific. The significance of apples might vary in different cultures, and the same goes for the symbolism of the pilgrimage. The translator must find equivalent symbols and metaphors that convey the same underlying messages and emotional impact in the target culture.

#### **4.3. Structural differences**

Oral narratives may follow different structural conventions compared to written texts. So, translating from Moroccan Arabic into English obliges the translator, in some cases, to change the structure of the source text. In this regard, each language has specificity of the order of words, thus displacing the whole sentences to give meaning, in some cases, becomes a necessity. Simple sentences are very present in the provided English translation, unlike the original version which is characterized by complexity.

The collected folktales include repetitions, digressions, and non-linear progressions that can be difficult to replicate in written form without losing the flow or intent of the original. Repetition for example could be seen as one of the characteristics of oral forms and expressions, so keeping such repetitions might be so awkward in the English version. Therefore, omission was, in some cases, adopted while translating the tales. The sentence “The boy kept running, running and asking” is the literal English translation of an expression mentioned in the story of “The Ogress”. The translation might sound awkward for the target readers. Thus, omission was sometimes necessary to ensure that the translated text was coherent and engaging for the target readers. In the given example, the sentence “The boy kept running, running and asking” might be streamlined to “The boy kept running and asking” to maintain readability while preserving the essence of the original narrative.

Additionally, digressions, which are common in oral storytelling as a way to provide context or elaborate on certain points, might be minimized or integrated more seamlessly into the main storyline. For instance, in the story of “The Boy and the Ogress”, Daouia, the narrator, kept over describing the ogress. The digressions that flow naturally in spoken storytelling can disrupt the pacing and coherence of a written narrative if not handled carefully. Therefore, these digressions were minimized so the written version would remain focused and coherent.

Alternatively, the translator might choose to preserve the digressions but present them in a way that feels natural in written form. This could involve using footnotes or endnotes to provide additional context without interrupting the story's flow.

#### **4.4. Preserving oral performance**

Oral traditions are often performative as they include rhythm, gestures and audience interaction. These performative aspects are integral to the tradition and difficult to represent in a written format. In this regard, rhythm in the collected folktales can be seen through repetitive structures as the folktales include repeated phrases, sentences, and sequences of events to create a rhythmic pattern. Rhythm can also be identified through incorporating songs in some folktales like "The Sultan", "The Sieve" and "The Flower". Besides, gestures and facial expressions add a visual dimension, conveying emotions and nuances that words alone cannot capture, while audience interaction plays an important role in transforming the performance into a communal event.

So, written formats often struggle to capture the full essence of folktales. The written word can convey the narrative but lacks the immediacy and communal engagement that performative elements bring.

Moreover, the unique voice and style of the storyteller are essential to the oral tradition. Translating these stylistic elements into another language while maintaining the original's flavor and impact is a significant challenge. In the story of "The Wolf and the Hedgehog", the storyteller, Douia, used a distinct voice that reflects the personality and role of each character. Translating these voices while keeping their uniqueness intact was quite challenging.

### **5. DISCUSSION**

Folktales, including those from Abdelghaya Souahel, are seen as the vehicle for the transmission of cultural values and cultural identity. They are enduring treasures of wisdom passed from one generation to another, continuing to serve as essential foundations for the community (Mphasha, 2015). Translating these folktales while keeping their authenticity poses certain challenges.

In this respect, translating the ten folktales from the region of Abdelghaya Souahel into English presents various linguistic and cultural challenges. The regional dialect of Abdelghaya Souahel, rich with unique vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, presents a significant challenge in translation. The dialect's specificity, such as the term "*msaltk*" used to signify "Once upon a time" and too many other terms lack a direct English equivalent. In such cases, the translator can rely on borrowing. The translator can keep such terms as they are while providing an explanatory note to help readers understand the cultural meaning.

The translation of symbolism and metaphors, which carry culturally specific meanings, is another challenge that comes to the fore when translating the folktales. One of the strategies to address this challenge is to find equivalent symbols and metaphors in the target culture that convey similar underlying messages and impact. Another strategy is to provide explanatory notes or footnotes to offer readers insights into the cultural significance of certain symbols and metaphors. This can help preserve the original meaning and enrich the reader's understanding of the cultural context.

Structural differences, as another challenge in cultural translation, can be addressed. The translator can employ various techniques to adapt the narrative structure to suit the conventions of the target language while preserving the original's essence. One approach is to simplify complex sentences into more straightforward structures, which is often necessary due to differences in sentence construction between languages. In this context, translators can adjust the order of sentences or paragraphs to match the logical flow of the target language. This might involve reordering events or explanations to fit the target audience's expectations.

Moreover, preserving the oral performance quality of folktales during translation can be particularly challenging, but it is essential for maintaining the authenticity and impact of the stories. Thus, translators can translate in a way that mimics the natural speech patterns of the target language, ensuring that the narrative flows smoothly when read aloud. Footnotes can also be relied on to explain, for example, how character voices are portrayed in the original oral performance.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The folktales from the Abdelghaya Souahel region hold an immense cultural significance, embodying the values, traditions, and collective wisdom of the community. These stories are not only essential for preserving the cultural heritage of the region, but they also serve as valuable educational tools that should be encouraged and integrated into our curriculum. Teaching these folktales can enrich students' understanding of local cultures and foster appreciation for oral narratives.

However, translating these folktales into English presents several challenges. Hence, addressing these challenge requires a careful and thoughtful approach to ensure that the authenticity of the original stories are maintained. By overcoming these hurdles, translators can make these traditional tales accessible to a wider audience, thereby promoting cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. The translation of folktales is thus a crucial endeavor in preserving and sharing the cultural heritage of the Abdelghaya Souahel region with the world.

Further research in this field could explore the role of digital platforms in disseminating translated folktales. Indeed, understanding how technology can preserve oral traditions and enhance accessibility without diluting cultural authenticity is quite important. This could involve developing multimedia approaches that incorporate audiovisual elements or interactive components.

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