



Between Myth and Memory: Reclaiming the Epistemic Power of Folk Culture

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ABSTRACT

Folk culture—comprising oral traditions, rituals, myths, songs, crafts, and localized customs—has long been relegated to the margins of scholarly discourse, often dismissed as an archaic residue of the past. This paper seeks to critically re-evaluate such positioning by reclaiming folk culture as a potent epistemic force, one that embodies alternative systems of knowledge, memory preservation, and social truth. Drawing upon interdisciplinary frameworks from philosophy, anthropology, and cultural studies, the article argues that folk culture should not merely be seen as a folkloric remnant, but as a dynamic and living archive of human cognition, ethics, and resistance. By positioning folk narratives as forms of embodied philosophy, the paper explores how myths and memories embedded in folk traditions serve not only to transmit communal values, but also to contest dominant historical paradigms and epistemic hierarchies. It reflects on the philosophical underpinnings of orality and collective memory, drawing parallels with the works of thinkers such as Paul Ricoeur, Walter Benjamin, and Edward Said. The analysis also delves into the epistemological distinction between written and oral traditions, suggesting that folk knowledge—though often deemed non-scientific or pre-modern—is rooted in contextual wisdom, ecological atonement, and socio-cultural resilience.



INTRODUCTION

Folk culture, often perceived as the informal and peripheral expression of human societies, occupies a paradoxical space in the intellectual imagination. While it permeates daily life through songs, proverbs, rituals, myths, and oral narratives, it remains largely excluded from dominant epistemological frameworks that privilege written, empirical, and institutionalized forms of knowledge. This exclusion is not incidental but is deeply rooted in colonial, Enlightenment, and modernist projects that equated progress with rationality and tradition with superstition.¹ In such a schema, folk culture has frequently been relegated to the status of the quaint, the folkloric, or the archaic—something to be preserved for cultural tourism or anthropological nostalgia, but not to be taken seriously as a site of critical thinking or knowledge production.

This article challenges such epistemic marginalization by asserting that folk culture is not merely a passive vessel of inherited traditions, but a dynamic, living epistemology. Rooted in collective memory and myth, folk traditions represent complex modes of understanding the world—forms of cognition that are symbolic, experiential, ecological, and historically grounded. Far from being irrational, these traditions often encode profound insights into social ethics, environmental sustainability, cosmology, and existential meaning. They offer alternative paradigms to dominant narratives of history, identity, and truth, particularly in contexts marked by colonialism, modernization, or cultural erasure.²

Central to this inquiry is the intersection of myth and memory—two pillars upon which much of folk culture is built. Myth, in this context, is not understood as mere fiction or illusion, but as a symbolic narrative that expresses the metaphysical truths, moral codes, and historical consciousness of a community. Memory, meanwhile, functions as a living repository of these narratives, transmitted orally across generations in ways that challenge the linearity and fixity of written records. Together, myth and memory form a dialogical space where collective identity is negotiated, contested, and reaffirmed. They serve as tools for cultural survival, social critique, and resistance, especially for marginalized communities whose voices have been silenced in dominant archives. By reclaiming the epistemic power of folk culture, this article engages with broader philosophical questions about what counts as knowledge, who gets to produce it, and

how different knowledge systems interact, conflict, or coexist. Drawing on thinkers such as Paul Ricoeur, Michel de Certeau, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the paper advocates for a pluriversal approach to knowledge—one that values oral, performative, and affective dimensions alongside the textual and empirical. Such an approach does not romanticize folk culture but seeks to restore its rightful place in the human intellectual tradition. In doing so, the article positions folk culture not simply as a matter of heritage or entertainment, but as a philosophically rich and politically urgent domain—one capable of informing contemporary debates on identity, memory, decolonization, and epistemic justice in a fractured and rapidly globalizing world.

Review of Literature

The epistemological significance of folk culture has historically been marginalized within academic discourse, often subordinated to the written, the rational, and the scientific. Early anthropological works, such as those by Edward Tylor and James Frazer, treated folklore as vestigial remnants of a pre-modern consciousness, reinforcing a linear model of cultural evolution. This reductionist view persisted well into the 20th century, limiting folk culture to the domains of aesthetic representation or ethnographic curiosity. However, recent scholarship has begun to challenge these reductive frameworks by exploring folk culture as a site of alternative epistemologies. Paul Ricoeur's writings on memory and narrative provide a critical foundation for understanding how myth and oral traditions serve as repositories of communal meaning and ethical imagination. Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity emphasizes the power of storytelling to construct historical consciousness beyond archival constraints. Similarly, Walter Benjamin's reflections on the storyteller emphasize the experiential and transmissible quality of folk knowledge, contrasting it with the alienation inherent in modern textual production.

Postcolonial theorists such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Linda Tuhiwai Smith have further critiqued Eurocentric definitions of knowledge, advocating for the restoration of indigenous and oral epistemologies in the face of colonial erasure. Ngũgĩ, in particular, has emphasized the political potency of orality in resisting cultural domination and reclaiming historical agency. Meanwhile, decolonial scholars like Boaventura de Sousa



Santos argue for an “ecology of knowledge,” which values folk, indigenous, and subaltern knowledges as coequal to academic forms. These interdisciplinary perspectives converge to highlight folk culture as a dynamic cognitive field—capable of expressing complex cosmologies, social values, and historical truths. This body of literature lays the groundwork for reimagining folk traditions not as backward residues, but as living philosophies essential to pluralistic and just epistemologies.

Research Objectives

1. To explore folk culture as a valid and dynamic form of knowledge.
2. To examine how myth and memory shape identity and historical consciousness.
3. To challenge Eurocentric epistemologies that marginalize oral traditions.
4. To advocate for the inclusion of folk knowledge in contemporary philosophical discourse.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in philosophical inquiry and cultural analysis. It draws upon secondary sources, including texts in folklore studies, postcolonial theory, and epistemology, to critically examine the cognitive and symbolic dimensions of folk culture. Emphasis is placed on textual interpretation, thematic analysis, and comparative reflection to uncover how myths and collective memory function as epistemic tools within diverse cultural contexts.

Epistemological Foundations of Folk Culture

Folk culture has long been confined to the margins of academic discourse, often dismissed as archaic or irrational in comparison to formal, written knowledge systems. Such dismissal stems not from a lack of value in folk expressions, but from an epistemological hierarchy imposed by colonial and modernist ideologies that equate legitimacy with textuality, objectivity, and linearity.³ Within this framework, oral traditions are frequently cast as unscientific, myths are interpreted as fiction, and collective memory is seen as unreliable. Yet these assumptions ignore the philosophical depth embedded in folk knowledge systems that continue to shape how communities understand themselves, history, and the natural world.

Orality functions not simply as a mode of communication, but as a method of knowledge preservation and transmission. In societies without written records, oral narratives serve as archives, maintaining continuity across generations. These narratives carry encoded wisdom about social conduct, ecological balance, kinship systems, and spiritual beliefs. For example, African griot traditions maintain elaborate historical records through performance and repetition, relying on memory and ritualized storytelling to preserve both factual events and moral lessons. To consider such systems inferior to print-based archives reflects a narrow view of what constitutes knowledge.⁴

Myths, often treated as fanciful or untrue, demand reevaluation. They are not intended to compete with empirical accounts but instead function within a symbolic framework. Myths provide moral instruction, cosmological orientation, and existential explanation. The Greek myth of Prometheus, for instance, conveys ideas about human ambition, defiance of divine authority, and the price of knowledge. In Indigenous cultures across the Americas, creation myths carry lessons about environmental stewardship and social responsibility. These stories are not products of ignorance but are tools for collective understanding that operate through metaphor, allegory, and symbolism.⁵ Collective memory, shaped by ritual, commemoration, and repetition, sustains community identity and continuity, especially in contexts where formal history has been silenced or erased. The memories of Partition in South Asia, for instance, are not preserved solely in official documents but are relayed through folk songs, ballads, and oral testimonies. These forms of remembering provide access to emotional truths and lived experiences that formal archives often omit. The epistemic validity of collective memory lies in its capacity to carry affective weight, shape intergenerational relationships, and resist historical erasure.

The dominance of Western epistemology has historically rejected these modalities by claiming universality for its own standards of evidence and reasoning. In doing so, it delegitimizes systems that do not conform to those standards. Yet knowledge is not monolithic. It arises from different cultural, environmental, and historical circumstances. The denial of folk epistemologies reflects an epistemic injustice, where certain ways of knowing are excluded based on culturally imposed standards.⁶ Folk culture cannot be reduced



to the aesthetic or anecdotal. Its oral traditions, myths, and memories represent foundational ways in which communities conceptualize existence, define values, and recall shared histories. To treat these elements as legitimate is not to romanticize them, but to recognize that knowledge need not conform to a single paradigm. A plural approach to epistemology reveals the enduring vitality of folk traditions as repositories of ethical reasoning, historical awareness, and symbolic cognition.

Myth and memory are foundational tools through which communities shape identity, transmit ethical values, and sustain historical awareness, especially in contexts marked by marginalization or colonial disruption. These elements do not function merely as cultural accessories.⁷ They perform essential cognitive and moral functions, often operating in the absence of written records or in defiance of imposed historical narratives. Within colonized societies, where dominant powers have suppressed local histories, myth and memory preserve versions of the past that challenge official accounts and reaffirm collective agency. Myths operate through symbolic narratives that explain origins, reinforce social norms, and articulate metaphysical truths. In colonized regions, they often preserve indigenous cosmologies and ethical worldviews that have been targeted for erasure. The Māori creation stories of Aotearoa, for instance, detail a cosmology rooted in relational balance, where human beings are interconnected with land, ancestors, and the divine. These narratives not only encode ecological ethics but also support resistance to settler colonial frameworks that impose hierarchical and extractive systems of thought.⁸

Memory, shaped through oral testimony, ritual, and commemorative practice, functions as a living archive. In communities denied access to formal documentation, memory serves as a strategy for survival and resistance. The African American tradition of spirituals, for example, carries not only religious sentiment but also coded messages of resistance and remembrance. These songs function as acts of testimony, connecting personal suffering to a broader historical continuum of enslavement, resilience, and aspiration. Communal identity takes form through the repetition and internalization of these shared stories and recollections. They are not fixed but evolve with each retelling, allowing communities to adapt to changing realities while maintaining a sense of historical rootedness. Ethical values are often embedded in these narratives through allegorical figures and moral conflicts.

Trickster figures in African and Native American stories challenge rigid norms, teaching lessons about adaptability, wisdom, and justice. Through such characters, communities pass down principles that guide interpersonal behaviour and collective responsibility.

Historical consciousness emerges not through linear chronology but through cyclical remembrance. The Dalit oral tradition in India recounts events such as the Bhima-Koregaon battle not as isolated moments but as living symbols of dignity and resistance. These memories contradict dominant caste narratives and serve as tools for social empowerment. Rather than relying solely on state-authored textbooks, such communities maintain their history through oral transmission, poetry, and ritual performance. Dismissing myth and memory as inferior to official history not only narrows the scope of understanding but also reinforces structural inequality in knowledge systems. When treated as legitimate forms of historical and ethical reasoning, these elements reveal how marginalized groups retain autonomy over their past and moral frameworks. Their continuity ensures that identity is not lost through assimilation and that values grounded in shared experience endure across generations.⁹

Dominant Eurocentric Paradigms of Knowledge

Dominant Eurocentric paradigms of knowledge have historically established a rigid hierarchy that equates legitimacy with written, empirical, and institutionally verified sources. These frameworks arose from Enlightenment-era rationalism, which privileged observation, logic, and textual authority over other modes of understanding. As a result, knowledge rooted in oral tradition, symbolic expression, and communal memory has been classified as inferior, primitive, or anecdotal. Such classification reflects a system of exclusion that marginalizes entire cultures and their intellectual foundations, particularly those without access to or interest in codified academic systems.¹⁰

Oral traditions preserve knowledge through spoken word, performance, and ritual. They are structured, intentional, and often governed by strict rules of transmission. For instance, among the Yoruba people of West Africa, the oral recitation of Ifá divination poetry contains encyclopaedic information on ethics, medicine, cosmology, and history. Despite lacking a formal script, these traditions maintain internal coherence, precision, and philosophical consistency. Their



marginalization in mainstream scholarship stems not from a lack of content but from the imposition of Western standards that dismiss non-textual methods as unreliable. Symbolic traditions, such as dance, embroidery, or ceremonial rites, also carry epistemic weight. Knowledge is encoded through gesture, pattern, or material form. Navajo sandpainting rituals, for example, contain intricate symbolic references to cosmological order, healing practices, and ancestral guidance.¹¹ These acts communicate knowledge not through linguistic clarity but through embodied meaning and communal participation. Western paradigms that define understanding solely in terms of propositional logic fail to recognize these as legitimate intellectual activities.

The exclusion of such traditions perpetuates an epistemic injustice. Knowledge systems are not neutral; they carry with them power relations, cultural assumptions, and historical violence. The dismissal of oral and symbolic forms enforces a monoculture of cognition, silencing diverse ways of knowing. This is particularly evident in postcolonial societies where colonizers imposed educational systems that devalued indigenous knowledge, replacing it with imported curricula and foreign languages. Such impositions severed communities from their own intellectual heritage.¹²

Resistance to Eurocentric models requires not only critique but also the active recovery of suppressed epistemologies. In Latin America, movements such as “Buen Vivir” reclaim indigenous Andean philosophies that prioritize collective well-being and ecological balance. These frameworks are grounded in oral transmission, ritual practice, and ancestral memory. They challenge capitalist models of development and offer alternative conceptions of value, economy, and social harmony. Oral and symbolic traditions must be evaluated on their own terms.¹³ Their exclusion from scholarly recognition is not a reflection of inadequacy but of a narrowed definition of knowledge that privileges the tools of the colonizer. A broader intellectual framework must recognize that cognition occurs through multiple channels—spoken, performed, remembered, and imagined. Refusing this recognition does not preserve academic rigor; it reproduces historical silencing. Engaging with these traditions does not entail abandoning critical standards but expanding them to include the full range of human expression and understanding.¹⁴

Eurocentric paradigms of knowledge rely on a hierarchy that privileges written, empirical, and institutionalized forms over oral and symbolic systems. Rooted in Enlightenment rationalism and colonial authority, this hierarchy assigns value based on specific methods of verification and documentation. The preference for written texts, peer-reviewed scholarship, and laboratory-based science has shaped global educational and intellectual systems, often erasing the validity of non-Western forms of knowing. Oral traditions and symbolic practices are routinely dismissed as unreliable or unsophisticated, not because they lack content or coherence, but because they do not conform to the dominant norms of academic recognition.¹⁵

Oral knowledge systems are governed by structures that ensure continuity, precision, and ethical transmission. For example, Aboriginal songlines in Australia encode geographical, spiritual, and social knowledge into melodic patterns. These songs not only guide navigation across vast landscapes but also establish law, genealogy, and metaphysical meaning. Their exclusion from academic discourse stems from a refusal to acknowledge non-written systems as methodologically rigorous. Such exclusion is not neutral; it reflects a legacy of intellectual colonization that links authority with print culture and denies legitimacy to embodied or performative modes of transmission. Symbolic traditions operate through visual, auditory, or gestural media. In Andean weaving patterns, symbols represent agricultural cycles, kinship structures, and cosmological beliefs. These visual codes carry generational knowledge embedded in material practice.¹⁶ Refusing to recognize such systems as intellectual acts perpetuates a narrow view of cognition restricted to verbal or quantitative expression. Epistemological boundaries are constructed to reinforce specific cultural frameworks, not to provide an inclusive account of how human beings generate and transmit meaning.

Postcolonial societies continue to grapple with the effects of these exclusions. Colonial education systems, designed to elevate European knowledge and marginalize indigenous methods, often succeeded in severing communities from their traditional intellectual lineages. Schools replaced oral instruction with standardized textbooks, ritual with doctrine, and local knowledge with foreign epistemology. This process did not simply introduce a new form of education; it actively devalued and



displaced existing systems of thought. Resistance to such paradigms requires active recognition of epistemic diversity. African philosophies transmitted through proverbs, storytelling, and communal deliberation reflect modes of reasoning as complex as any found in Western thought.¹⁷ These traditions rely on metaphor, collective interpretation, and moral framing, none of which diminish their intellectual depth. The continued exclusion of such systems signals not an absence of rigor but a refusal to expand definitional boundaries.

Knowledge cannot be treated as culturally neutral. Systems of knowing are embedded in histories of power, access, and legitimacy. The privileging of written, institutionalized forms reflects a historical process of control rather than a universal standard of truth. Challenging this order demands an intellectual framework capable of engaging with oral and symbolic forms on equal terms, without imposing the criteria of one tradition upon another. Accepting plurality in knowledge systems is not an act of concession; it is a requirement for intellectual honesty in a world shaped by diverse ways of understanding.¹⁸

Folk culture must be recognized not as a remnant of the past but as a living form of knowledge production that continues to evolve, adapt, and respond to the needs of its communities. Its songs, myths, oral histories, rituals, crafts, and performative expressions serve more than cultural preservation. They function as epistemological systems that carry meaning, interpret experience, and guide social conduct. Treating folk culture as static or obsolete reinforces an academic structure that equates value with formal education and textual authority, ignoring the ways in which non-institutional knowledge contributes to public discourse, particularly in matters of justice and identity. Contemporary debates on decolonization often rely on reclaiming forms of knowledge that colonial systems sought to erase. Folk culture becomes a critical source in this process. In India, the Bhakti and Sufi traditions offer models of resistance to both caste orthodoxy and imperial imposition through vernacular poetry, communal music, and performative devotion. These forms do not rely on scholarly validation to retain authority; they are grounded in collective experience and ethical reasoning. Such traditions respond to questions of social inequality and spiritual dignity in ways that formal academic discourse often cannot access or replicate.¹⁹

Folk culture also contributes to the construction and affirmation of identity, particularly for marginalized groups. African American spirituals, Mexican corridos, and Indigenous Canadian drumming ceremonies preserve not only aesthetic expression but also memory, trauma, and endurance. These practices speak to histories of violence and displacement, serving as acts of remembrance and moral claim. Their role in shaping community self-understanding cannot be dismissed as secondary to policy debates or academic theorization. They are, in themselves, acts of intellectual and political agency. Epistemic justice requires the inclusion of systems that have been systematically excluded, not through absence of logic or reason, but through imposed hierarchies of knowledge. Folk culture transmits knowledge through non-linear, embodied, and symbolic means. That it falls outside formal scholarly categories does not reduce its philosophical substance. The Sámi joik, for instance, encodes detailed knowledge about environmental rhythms, animal behaviour, and personal memory. Such practices hold relevance for ecological ethics and cultural continuity in the face of environmental degradation and forced assimilation.²⁰

The recognition of folk culture as a living epistemology challenges the assumption that intellectual contribution must be measured through publication, citation, or peer review. It asserts that song, ceremony, oral narrative, and craft are not passive carriers of the past but active participants in ongoing discourse. They engage with modernity not from a place of inferiority but from a different starting point—one that values relationality, memory, and community over abstraction, individualism, and institutional prestige. Addressing decolonization, identity, and justice without folk epistemologies results in partial understanding. Intellectual inclusion cannot rest solely on linguistic diversity or curricular reform. It must account for forms of knowing that are deeply embedded in cultural practice and collective memory. Folk culture, in its dynamic continuity, offers a method of engaging the world rooted in human experience, ethical awareness, and historical depth. Its recognition is not a matter of cultural preservation alone but a necessary condition for epistemic equality.²¹

Reclaiming folk knowledge systems is neither an act of nostalgia nor an exercise in romanticism. It constitutes a political and cultural necessity in the face of globalization, cultural



homogenization, and deliberate historical erasure. Globalization often promotes a standardized model of modernity, dominated by Western technological, linguistic, and educational frameworks. Within such systems, knowledge that does not conform to institutional formats or international market utility is cast aside. Folk knowledge, rooted in oral memory, ritual practice, ecological awareness, and communal ethics, finds itself treated as peripheral or redundant. The marginalization of such knowledge does not result from a lack of relevance but from deliberate structural displacement. Cultural homogenization reduces diversity by privileging universal consumer habits and dominant languages. In the process, it devalues vernacular traditions and lived forms of knowledge. Traditional food practices, local medicinal systems, and oral histories are displaced by global standards that demand uniformity. For instance, Indigenous farming practices in Latin America, such as the milpa system in Mexico, maintain soil fertility and biodiversity far more effectively than industrial agriculture. Yet such practices are dismissed or replaced through modernization programs that fail to recognize their intellectual foundation. Reclaiming them is not about returning to an idealized past but about asserting local knowledge as a valid response to environmental and social challenges.²²

Historical silencing often accompanies colonization and forced assimilation. Education systems in colonized nations imposed foreign languages and historical narratives while excluding indigenous knowledge. In Canada, residential schools aimed to eradicate First Nations traditions, including their systems of law, health, and cosmology. Reclaiming these traditions through storytelling, ceremonial revival, and language reclamation serves as an act of resistance. It also restores continuity between generations that were divided through institutional violence. Reclamation, in this sense, is not passive remembrance but a deliberate reactivation of meaning and purpose. Political significance lies in the ability of folk knowledge to support autonomy and challenge centralized authority. When tribal communities in India revive their oral histories and local governance models, they push back against state-imposed narratives and bureaucratic control. Such

practices allow communities to assert their historical presence and cultural logic without waiting for validation from external authorities. They provide frameworks for decision-making, conflict resolution, and ethical behaviour grounded in long-standing social contracts rather than imported policies.²³

Cultural significance is equally evident. Folk knowledge carries identity, memory, and belonging. Songs sung during harvest, stories told in winter gatherings, or symbols embroidered into clothing maintain not just information but meaning. They mark time, encode survival strategies, and affirm social bonds. Erasure of these forms results in cultural disorientation, especially for younger generations exposed primarily to external models of success and progress. Reclaiming folk knowledge resists the flattening of human experience into data, metrics, and standardized outcomes. It reaffirms that knowledge is diverse, situated, and relational. Political agency and cultural survival depend on such reclamation, not as heritage preservation alone, but as an assertion of alternative ways of knowing and living in the present.

CONCLUSION

Folk culture must be acknowledged as a living epistemology capable of shaping ethical reasoning, historical understanding, and communal identity. Oral traditions, myths, and symbolic practices are not inferior substitutes for written knowledge but distinct modes of cognition that respond to specific social and ecological realities. In contexts marked by colonial disruption, forced assimilation, and global cultural flattening, these traditions carry enduring relevance. They preserve memory, express resistance, and sustain intellectual autonomy in ways that institutional systems often ignore. Reclaiming folk knowledge is not a retreat into the past but a deliberate act of epistemic justice. It challenges imposed hierarchies, restores silenced voices, and affirms that valid knowledge exists beyond textual authority. Recognition of these traditions enriches public discourse and supports more inclusive frameworks for understanding human experience. Such recognition requires a shift in values—from extraction and standardization to respect, continuity, and plural modes of meaning-making grounded in community and memory.



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