

FROM ORAL TO MACHINE MEMORY: PRESERVING AFRICAN FOLKLORE THROUGH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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Abstract:

For centuries, African societies have sustained their heritage through oral tradition—a living archive of wisdom, history, and moral instruction. Myths, folktales, and proverbs, which are integral components of folklore, have long served to transmit collective memory and social ethics. In the twenty-first century, the digital era, globalisation and technological dominance pose significant threats to the preservation of these intangible cultural heritages. This paper, guided by Postcolonial Theory and Cultural Memory Theory, examines how Artificial Intelligence (AI) can serve as a new griot—a digital custodian capable of preserving, translating, and regenerating African folklore. Postcolonial Theory provides a framework for critiquing technological dominance and emphasising the need for African agency in digital preservation, while Cultural Memory Theory offers a lens for understanding how ancestral memory can migrate from oral performance to machine-mediated forms of preservation. Through natural language processing, machine learning, and voice-synthesis technologies, AI can document endangered languages, reconstruct lost narratives, and analyse symbolic motifs. However, the paper also interrogates ethical concerns surrounding data ownership, cultural misrepresentation, and the spiritual implications of encoding cultural memory in machines. Ultimately, it argues that, when guided by indigenous scholars and cultural custodians, AI can evolve from a potential instrument of cultural erasure into a means of cultural sustainability, bridging ancestral wisdom with the technological consciousness of the future.

Keywords: Folklore, Artificial Intelligence, Oral Tradition, Cultural Memory, Postcolonial Theory, Digital Heritage.

Introduction

Achebe believes that one who does not know where the rain began to beat him will not know where it dried upon his body. It is, therefore, a fact that for one to appreciate and live meaningfully in an egalitarian society, one must understand the way of life of that society. The totality of a people's worldview, customs, moral codes, and artistic expression is encapsulated in their folklore (Nnyagu 2025). Folklore serves as the living memory of a people, the invisible thread that connects generations and preserves the soul of a community. It embodies their wisdom, their sense of justice, and their moral philosophy.

According to Kikpatrick, in literature, folklore refers to the traditional stories, beliefs, customs, and knowledge of a particular group that are transmitted orally from one generation to another. It encompasses myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, and songs — all of which express the values, anxieties, and hopes of the people. These traditional forms of expression are not merely aesthetic; they perform vital social and pedagogical functions. Through them, writers and custodians of oral traditions explore culture, communicate moral lessons, and offer commentary on society. In African communities, folklore has always functioned as both entertainment and instruction — a medium through which collective identity, ancestral consciousness, and communal ethics are preserved and transmitted. Kikpatrick rightly maintains that folklore is “the study of the customs, beliefs, and fairy tales” that give meaning and continuity to a people's way of life.

Before the advent of writing and modern technology, oral tradition sustained this cultural continuum. Every society, before the rise of literacy, possessed certain elements that bound its members together — shared stories, rituals, and performances that defined their worldview. The cultural bond was never documented in writing because writing itself had not evolved; rather, it lived in the spoken word, in memory, in rhythm, and in

performance. Among Africans, the oral tradition was the sacred vessel through which history, ethics, and religion flowed. Long before the coming of Europeans, various African societies had their own systems of education, governance, and social order — all preserved through oral forms such as songs, chants, invocations, and praise poetry.

It shocked African scholars that European writers and philosophers described Africa as a continent devoid of civilization, history, or spiritual depth. Herodotus once echoed Aristotle's claim that Africa was a land inhabited by wild creatures. More insultingly, Hegel declared, "At this point, we stop talking about Africa... because Africa is no historical part of the world." Such sweeping statements, including Frabius' claim that Africa had no religion or culture until Arabs and Europeans brought them, provoked deep intellectual resentment. African scholars, writers, and nationalists began to challenge these distortions, asserting that Africa's civilization and cultural sophistication had long predated colonial contact.

Consequently, Chinua Achebe, through *Things Fall Apart*, refuted the Eurocentric illusion of a Africa not having any culture. His novel became a literary manifesto, reclaiming African dignity and reaffirming the vitality of its oral tradition. Achebe demonstrates that Africa did not hear of culture for the first time from Europe. He portrays a society that was cohesive, spiritually rich, and morally structured — until colonialism disrupted it by "putting a knife on the thing that held us together," thereby precipitating the disintegration of traditional life.

Before colonization, African societies flourished on the strength of communal memory. Myths explained creation and human destiny; folktales educated the young; proverbs distilled collective wisdom; and songs celebrated heroism, harvest, and divine presence. Elders, griots, and storytellers acted as living libraries, preserving the past through narrative performance. Finnegan rightly observes that "oral literature in Africa was the principal means by which history and knowledge were communicated and preserved" (Finnegan 23). The spoken word, therefore, operated as both archive and performance — a dynamic process that united history, art, and morality in one continuum.

Under the moonlight, children gathered around storytellers who relayed folktales that were not only entertaining but profoundly didactic. These tales taught respect, humility, and communal responsibility, while also serving as a record of collective experience. Songs and chants, often accompanied by drums and call-and-response patterns, embodied the rhythm of communal life. Through these oral forms, the people's history, religion, and philosophy were enacted and remembered. Folklore was thus indispensable — an education of the heart as much as of the mind.

However, the twenty-first century has ushered in new challenges that threaten this cultural continuum. Globalization, urbanization, migration, and the dominance of digital technology have eroded traditional storytelling spaces and weakened intergenerational bonds. Indigenous languages are dying; oral artists are aging without successors; and communal performances are yielding to digital distractions. Cultural memory faces extinction in an era increasingly defined by technological acceleration and cultural homogenization. Yet, paradoxically, the same technology that endangers orality may also offer the key to its revival.

Artificial Intelligence (AI), with its vast capacity for memory, language modeling, and pattern recognition, now presents a new frontier for cultural preservation. Through Natural Language Processing (NLP), voice synthesis, and machine learning, AI can record endangered languages, archive oral performances, and even regenerate forgotten stories. The possibility of transforming machines into cultural custodians raises both hope and ethical concerns.

This paper therefore examines how AI can function as a "new griot," a digital custodian capable of preserving, translating, and regenerating African folklore. Framed within Postcolonial Theory and Cultural Memory Theory, the study interrogates the intersections of tradition and technology, exploring how indigenous epistemologies can dialogue with digital systems. It also raises pertinent questions about authorship, cultural ownership, and the spiritual implications of transferring ancestral memory into machines. Ultimately, the paper argues that when AI is guided by cultural custodians and grounded in indigenous frameworks, it can evolve from a tool of epistemic domination into an instrument of cultural sustainability — bridging ancestral wisdom with the emergent consciousness of the digital age.

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed within two complementary theoretical paradigms which are Postcolonial Theory and Cultural Memory Theory. These theories provide the intellectual foundation for interrogating the areas of overlap between African oral tradition and Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a new repository of cultural memory. As the researcher, I believe that the frameworks are apt for the research as they are essential in understanding how the transition from oral to digital forms of remembrance can either reproduce colonial hierarchies or serve as an act of cultural reclamation and renewal.

Postcolonial Theory examines how colonialism, and its aftermath, has shaped societies, cultures, and identities, especially in formally colonized regions like Africa and other places. The theory looks at what happened to people's minds, languages and cultures after the colonisers had left. It studies how colonial power, domination, and exploitation continue to influence literature, politics and other aspects of the people's heritage. In other word, the theory emerged as a response to the cultural and epistemic domination of formerly colonized societies by Western powers. It exposes how colonialism extended beyond political control to the colonization of knowledge, language, and representation. The theory is believed not to be propounded by a single individual, rather, it developed through the works of several major thinkers who approached colonization from different angles. Edward Said, however, is widely regarded as the founder, courtesy his groundbreaking 1978 book, *Orientalism*.

Other scholars include: Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Homi Bhabha. They argue that colonialism distorted the self-perception of colonized peoples and imposed Eurocentric systems of meaning that erased indigenous epistemologies. Within the African context, this theoretical framework insists that true decolonization must involve the recovery and validation of suppressed knowledge systems, including oral traditions, languages, and forms of artistic expression.

Applying Postcolonial Theory to this study enables a critical reflection on the ownership and ethics of digital preservation. The increasing use of AI to document, preserve and analyze folklore raises questions similar to those provoked by colonial ethnography: Who defines what constitutes authentic culture? Who curates and interprets indigenous knowledge? Whose voice is privileged in the digital narrative of African identity? If Artificial Intelligence is trained primarily on Western data and models, it risks perpetuating technological neocolonialism, where African stories are filtered, interpreted, and stored through external epistemological frameworks. Thus, Postcolonial Theory equips this study with the tools to interrogate power, representation, and control in the digitization of African folklore. It calls for an indigenization of digital memory — one that recognizes African custodians, scholars, and communities as the rightful narrators and interpreters of their own heritage.

While Postcolonial Theory addresses the politics of power and representation, Cultural Memory Theory offers a framework for understanding how societies construct and transmit collective memory across generations. Developed by Maurice Halbwachs and expanded by Jan and Aleida Assmann, the theory distinguishes between *communicative memory* — the living memory carried within oral and performative culture — and *cultural memory* — the institutionalized forms of remembrance preserved in texts, monuments, and archives. Cultural memory is not static; it is continually mediated, reconstructed, and reinterpreted through cultural symbols, rituals, and media.

This framework is particularly relevant to the study because African oral tradition itself is a form of *living cultural memory*. Through myths, songs, proverbs, and storytelling, African societies preserve their histories, moral codes, and worldviews. These oral forms are not merely linguistic; they are performative, communal, and spiritually charged. As such, they represent a dynamic interaction between memory and identity. The application of AI as a new medium for storing and regenerating folklore thus raises fundamental questions about how memory is mediated: Can digital technologies preserve the spirit and communal essence of oral performance? Does machine memory have the capacity to embody emotion, ritual, and spirituality — elements intrinsic to African modes of remembrance?

Cultural Memory Theory helps this study analyze the transformation of memory as it moves from the oral to the digital sphere. It provides insight into how AI technologies — through natural language processing, machine learning, and digital archiving — function as *new media of memory*, shaping how cultures remember, forget, and reinterpret their pasts. It also invites reflection on how digital archives might alter the participatory nature of traditional storytelling by replacing human narrators with algorithmic ones. In this sense, AI becomes both an opportunity and a challenge: an opportunity to preserve endangered languages and narratives, and a challenge to maintain the authenticity and emotional depth of oral tradition within digital frameworks.

Together, Postcolonial Theory and Cultural Memory Theory enable a holistic analysis of the problem under study. The former critiques the structures of domination that may accompany digital preservation, while the latter examines the processes of remembrance and transformation that occur when oral heritage enters technological systems. Their convergence allows this paper to argue that Artificial Intelligence can serve as a decolonized archive — a *new griot* — only when it is guided by indigenous values, languages, and epistemologies. This fusion of theories underscores the central thesis of the paper: that technology, when ethically and culturally grounded, can bridge the wisdom of the past with the innovation of the future, ensuring that Africa's oral memory does not perish but evolves into a sustainable digital consciousness. Having established the conceptual lenses guiding this research, the paper proceeds to examine the African oral tradition as a living archive that predates written history and sustains communal memory.

African Oral Tradition as a Cultural Archive

Achebe was right when he argued that Africans did not hear of culture and tradition from the Europeans. Before colonisation, African people had a culture and tradition that bound them together. African oral tradition constitutes the earliest and most enduring form of cultural memory in the continent's history. According to Nnyagu, African oral tradition embodies the wisdom, beliefs, and moral code of the people. These traditions were not documented in written form but rather, transmitted from generation to generation through the spoken word. Okoh noted that oral tradition thrived in societies where writing was unknown or secondary. In such places, oral expression served as the principal means of education, social control, and collective remembrance. It was through oral performance that history was narrated, values were reinforced, and identity was constructed. The African concept of memory is therefore not limited to the mind but extends to the community itself, which functions as both the custodian and performer of knowledge. In this sense, oral tradition is Africa's "living archive," a dynamic institution that stores, renews, and transmits the essence of cultural experience.

African oral tradition is reflected in its diverse forms, including folktales, proverbs, myths, songs, chants, riddles, and praise poetry. Each of these genres performs specific social and moral functions. Folktale is a short anonymous narrative that forms part of the folklore of a people and region and passed down through oral tradition (X.J Kennedy, Dana Gioia and Mark Bauerlein 66). Folktale, like other forms of folklore, is not written down, rather, it dramatizes the tensions and resolutions of communal life. Folktale makes use of animals and other natural, rather than supernatural beings as characters to teach moral lessons (Nnyagu 66). Through the characters of the stories, listeners learn virtues like prudence, patience, and justice, and also the consequences of greed or deceit as it is always the case with the stereotyped character, Tortoise who always uses cunningness to outsmart the other characters. For example, the story of Tortoise and Elephant vividly demonstrates how Tortoise uses cunningness to outsmart Elephant. The story of Ant and Grasshopper teaches prudence and resilience as well as the consequence of laziness. Ant is prudent, during harvest session, it invites its friend, Grasshopper to join in harvesting and storing food in preparation for the season of famine. Grasshopper prefers to play around and during famine, Grasshopper sees no food to eat while Ant has more than enough because it was well prepared for the season. Another aspect of folklore worth discussing here is proverb. Proverb is a pithy saying that expresses some fundamental truth of human life or experience, even such truism as abstract. (Okoh 124). Okoh emphasised the importance of proverbs, maintaining that proverbs serve as compressed repositories of wisdom. As Nnyagu observed that folklore has three branches which verbal lore is one. Verbal lore, to him, is that aspect of folklore that is verbalised. Folktale, proverbs, myths and others are the verbal instruments of philosophy and persuasion. Achebe simply but rightly describes proverb as "the palm oil with which words are eaten." Myths are another aspect of verbal lore that needs attention. Nnyagu observed that myth and folktale have semblance both their areas of disparity are clear. While both are short narratives, passed down through generations via oral tradition, folktale uses natural beings as the characters while myth uses both natural and supernatural beings. Again, while folktale aims basically to teach moral lessons, myth aims to state the mysteries of creation and the origin of being albeit not universally acknowledged fact. Among the Yoruba, the myth of Obatala portrays the creation of the world and the moral consequences of human imperfection. Other aspects of verbal lore include: Songs and chants in the form of work songs, war songs, dirges, or *mbem*. Those serve as emotional and aesthetic expressions of community life. They preserve both the language and rhythm of the people. Riddles and tongue twisters, usually recited among children, sharpen intelligence and language mastery. Praise poetry and panegyrics celebrate the deeds of heroes, ancestors, and deities, functioning as oral historiography and identity markers.

Importance/Functions of Oral Tradition

Oral tradition is the copus of stories, songs, folk tales, myths, and rituals within a culture that are transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to another (Kennedy *et al* 111). They maintain that oral tradition serves as a fund of cultural memory, the repository of narratives and heroes that embody the culture's values and beliefs in

societies without writing. Achebe had pointed out that in truth, Africa had tradition that bound the people together before the coming of the Europeans. He frowns with the Europeans who made vogue statements that African was savage until the Arabs introduced modern religion and culture to Africa. Many Europeans including Hegel, Herodotus and Joseph Conrad had written Africa off as a place of barbarians. Concerned African scholars including Chinweizu, Achebe and Pio Zirimu vigorously refuted the assertions of the Europeans. Zirimu wondered why the Europeans should conceive such barbaric thought that Africa had no tradition because they had tradition documented in writing. He believed that before written culture, oral culture had been. From oral literature, subsumed under oral tradition, Zirimu coined the term, *Orature*.

Beyond their forms, oral traditions perform crucial functions that sustain the moral and intellectual fabric of African societies. They serve as mnemonic devices, employing repetition, rhythm, and formulaic phrasing to facilitate the retention and transmission of knowledge. Their didactic function lies in the moral instruction they convey, teaching respect for elders, obedience to communal norms, and the virtues of hard work, humility, and solidarity. Socially, oral performance brings members of the community together, reinforcing the bonds of kinship and belonging through collective participation. Historically, these oral forms have preserved genealogies, migrations, wars, and cultural transformations long before the introduction of writing. They also embody aesthetic creativity, reflected in imagery, metaphor, and performance artistry that animate the oral landscape.

Each African culture developed its unique forms of oral expression, yet they all share a common understanding that the spoken word is the vessel of life and memory. Among the Igbo, moonlight tales (*akụkọ n'egwu onwa*) and proverbial exchanges educate the young and affirm communal wisdom. The Yoruba preserve identity and ancestral knowledge through *oriki* and the myths of the *orisa*, while the Hausa employ *tatsuniya* (folktales) and *waka* (songs) to transmit moral and philosophical insights.

In all these traditions, the storyteller, singer, or griot acts as both historian and philosopher, embodying the continuity of cultural consciousness. As Ruth Finnegan rightly observes, “oral literature in Africa was the principal means by which history and knowledge were communicated and preserved” (23). The spoken word, therefore, serves as both performance and archive—a living process of remembering that renews social values and connects generations.

Oral tradition, in this context, represents more than a mode of artistic expression; it is a system of knowledge preservation and transmission deeply rooted in the collective psyche. Unlike the written archive, which fixes memory on paper, the oral archive thrives on re-creation and adaptability. It evolves with the community and responds to changing realities, yet it retains its essential moral and cultural core. Thus, African oral tradition is not a relic of the past but a living conversation between the ancestors and the present generation—a dialogue sustained by memory, performance, and participation. In this way, Africa’s oral heritage stands as a testament to the continent’s intellectual and creative resilience, embodying what Jan Assmann calls “cultural memory”—the active process by which societies construct and maintain their identity through shared remembrance.

The Colonial Misconception of African Orality

The belief of the Europeans that nothing good could emanate from Africa necessitated the coming of European anthropologists coming down to Africa. Even when they could not penetrate different African societies to understand the region, they held still, their obnoxious view that Africa is savage. Herodotus, and Hegel provided philosophical ammunition for this denigration. Herodotus described Africa as a place of monsters and mysteries, while Hegel’s infamous assertion that “Africa is no historical part of the world” erased centuries of oral civilization and cultural achievement. Such statements, echoed later by anthropologists and early missionaries, created an enduring myth of Africa as a continent without history, memory, or rational discourse.

The problem deepened when Western literary critics like Northrop Frye and later Bernth Lindfors approached African writing through Eurocentric frameworks that could not comprehend oral aesthetics. African oral traditions with their communal participation were misunderstood as crude or childish. The European critics viewed African oral tradition as trivial and childish. First, the fact that folktales were told at night, they tagged it barbaric believing that whatever that is done at night is evil. They fail to understand that why the tales were told at night was because African people are industrious. In the day time, they would be at their various places of work and night time was the only time they had for pleasure.

African scholars and creative writers who were angered by the views of the Europeans responded vigorously to these distortions. Chinua Achebe, through *Things Fall Apart*, demonstrated that African society before

European contact was highly organized, morally coherent, and deeply rooted in oral wisdom. His famous metaphor of “the knife that severed the things that held us together” refers not only to political disruption but also to the assault on African collective memory — the dislocation of oral heritage. Colonialism, therefore, not only disrupted African political sovereignty but also sought to overwrite its intellectual foundations. The dislocation of orality marked a rupture in the continuum of memory. Yet, in the postcolonial era, African writers and scholars have worked to heal that rupture — reclaiming the spoken word as a legitimate vessel of philosophy, history, and aesthetics. Today, this struggle extends into the digital age. As global information systems continue to privilege Western languages and literacies, African cultural memory once again risks marginalization. But unlike the colonial past, Africans now possess the tools and awareness to resist. The question that arises, then, is how these once-oral memories can be preserved and revitalized within digital frameworks — not as museum artifacts, but as living archives that continue to speak.

The Roles of Technology in Preserving Oral Tradition

The preservation of oral traditions, which form the backbone of many African societies' cultural memory, has long been threatened by globalization, urbanization, and the decline in traditional storytelling practices. However, the advent of technology, particularly in the form of digital tools, presents new opportunities for safeguarding these vital cultural expressions. Among the most promising technological innovations are systems that capture and store oral narratives, ensuring their longevity. Below are several key roles that technology plays in the preservation and revitalization of oral tradition:

1. Transcription and Archiving of Oral Narratives

Oral traditions such as folktales, proverbs, and songs, which were once passed down exclusively through verbal exchange, can now be transcribed and archived using modern digital tools. Through voice recognition technology and automated transcription software, oral performances can be recorded, converted into text, and stored in digital formats. This process ensures that these stories, which are often at risk of being forgotten, are preserved for future generations. The availability of these transcriptions in digital libraries or online platforms makes them accessible to scholars, students, and the general public, fostering continued engagement with these cultural treasures (Finnegan 23).

2. Language Preservation

A significant number of African languages, particularly those tied to specific oral traditions, are endangered. Many of these languages lack formal written records, making their preservation a crucial task. Technology, particularly speech recognition systems and language learning apps, provides a valuable tool for recording and analyzing these languages. By capturing the nuances of pronunciation, tone, and rhythm, technology helps ensure that even the most obscure dialects are not lost to time. Furthermore, digital platforms can facilitate language revitalization by enabling younger generations to learn and engage with their ancestral languages through interactive programs (Nnyagu 66).

3. Reconstruction of Fragmented Narratives

Many African communities have experienced historical disruptions — whether through colonialism, migration, or cultural erosion — which have left gaps in their oral traditions. In such cases, digital technologies can assist in the reconstruction of fragmented or incomplete narratives. By analyzing existing oral texts, technological tools can identify recurring motifs, characters, and themes across different cultures. This allows for the reimagining of lost folktales, songs, and myths by synthesizing elements from related traditions, thereby filling gaps and recreating lost cultural narratives without compromising their original essence. This method not only preserves the narratives but also reinvigorates them, ensuring they continue to serve their educational and moral functions (Okoh 124).

4. Mapping Cultural Memory

Technological tools also facilitate the mapping of cultural memory, tracing the geographical and social origins of various oral traditions. By analyzing the spread and evolution of folktales, songs, and myths across regions, researchers can identify patterns of cultural exchange, migration, and transformation. Digital databases and geographic information systems (GIS) allow for the visualization of cultural memory, helping scholars and communities understand how specific narratives have traveled and adapted over time. This also helps pinpoint forgotten aspects of heritage, offering insight into how oral traditions have evolved across different communities (Assmann 19).

5. Interactive Storytelling

One of the most innovative applications of technology in preserving oral tradition is the development of virtual storytellers. These interactive digital platforms, which can include chatbots or voice synthesis programs, can engage users in real-time storytelling, delivering folktales, proverbs, and myths in a dynamic, participatory manner. Unlike traditional written archives, which passively present information, these virtual storytellers provide an immersive, interactive experience. Users can engage with the stories by asking questions, making choices, or even contributing their own narratives. This interaction helps bridge the gap between traditional oral

performances and the digital age, ensuring that the storytelling process remains communal and participatory (Finnegan 23).

6. Ensuring Ethical Custodianship

While technology offers promising tools for the preservation of oral traditions, it also raises concerns about ethical practices in cultural preservation. The question of ownership — who controls the data and the interpretation of cultural materials — remains a significant issue. It is essential that the development of digital preservation technologies be guided by indigenous knowledge holders, scholars, and cultural custodians. These individuals and communities should have a central role in shaping the digital archives, ensuring that the stories and traditions are accurately represented and that they are not commodified or misinterpreted. Cultural custodianship involves not just the preservation of oral traditions, but also the ethical management of these narratives to ensure that they remain authentic and meaningful to the communities they represent (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 81).

Conclusion

In conclusion, technology plays a multifaceted and essential role in preserving African oral traditions and ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage. Through transcription, language preservation, the reconstruction of lost narratives, cultural memory mapping, and interactive storytelling, technological tools provide powerful means of documenting, safeguarding, and transmitting oral traditions to future generations. However, these tools must be deployed responsibly and under the guidance of indigenous scholars and cultural custodians to ensure that the authenticity, cultural meanings, and spiritual dimensions of oral traditions are preserved. Technology can therefore serve as a valuable ally in safeguarding African cultural memory, provided that it is employed with care, respect, cultural sensitivity, and a strong commitment to cultural integrity.

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