

Visualising Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Conceptual Framework on the Adaptation of Oral Traditions into Creative Practices

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Abstract – Folklore encompasses the knowledge, experiences, and creative thinking passed down from ancestors through generations via word of mouth. It serves as a means of preserving cultural traditions and expressing socio-cultural aspects of a society. One such folklore narrative deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of Sri Lanka is the story of Kuweni. Kuweni, the unacknowledged queen who aided King Vijaya in his conquest of the island, holds historical, literal, geographical, and cultural significance. This narrative highlights the anthropological value inherent in folk traditions. Moreover, the story has been documented in ancient literature, lending factual credibility to the character of Kuweni. It has also served as an inspiration for dramatic performances, films, songs, and paintings exploring Kuweni's emotional dilemmas. However, there is a lack of comprehensive academic study on transforming folklore characters into creative disciplines. This research employs a qualitative approach to study the literature and folk narratives surrounding Kuweni, utilizing folklore categorization techniques such as the scientific and social scientific approaches with thematic analysis to identify the main themes. As a result of that, Thematic Metaphorical Approach (TMA) helps to identify and explore the central themes associated with folklore characters. This conceptual framework is applicable to in-depth exploration of any significant folklore character, providing a solid foundation for creative industries to delve into their themes without encountering pitfalls.

Keywords: Folklore, Kuweni, Thematic analysis, Concept development

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Introduction

Folklore plays a significant role in characterizing and symbolizing concepts, revealing historical knowledge blended with creativity over an extended period of time. Confirming this fact, the folklore of *Kuweni* is intertwined with the origin of both the Sinhalese and the indigenous community (*Veddas*) of Sri Lanka (SL). *Kuweni*, who is deeply connected to the historical arrival of Vijaya, has become a prominent figure in Sri Lankan history. Apart from the *Mahavamsa*, the great chronicle of SL, she has been mentioned in ancient literature such as *wansaththappakasini*, *pujawaliya*, *rajathnakaraya*, *vijayaraja katawa*, and *siyabasmaldama* (Suraweera, 1976). Although there are slight variations in these stories, all of them affirm that, *Kuweni* played a crucial role in Vijaya's victory. Throughout these different stories, *Kuweni*'s life transforms from human to superhuman forms, taking on various life roles such as hermit, a beautiful maiden, a queen, a wife, a mother, and an abundant woman in her human forms, while her supernatural forms range from a bitch, a mare, and to a curse of a leopard. According to *Kuweni Asna*, both Vijaya and Panduwasudeva experienced the curse of *Kuweni* in the form of a nightmare involving a big leopard. To cure king Panduwasudeva, *Kohomba Yak Kankariya* was introduced (Gunawardene, 2008). Therefore, it becomes evident that the character of *Kuweni* is deeply connected to the origin of communities like the Sinhalese and *Veddas*, as well as to the cursing practices and various folklore arts, including ritualistic practices in Sri Lanka. (Dissanyake, 1998). Furthermore, these narratives provide insights into different crafts such as weaving, woodcraft, jewelry production, and valuable information about the lifestyle of the people who lived during that time. Even though there is no tangible evidence, this folklore cannot be dismissed from society as it offers a profound understanding of the way of life.

Purpose of Study

Impactful socio-cultural and technological changes in society have brought folklore to the brink of extinction in its original form, particularly in oral transmission. This oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation, plays a crucial role in preserving the authenticity of folklore. Consequently, storytelling has emerged as a fundamental catalyst for fashion concepts, fostering emotional connections between consumers and fashion brands/products. Storytelling has become a promising trend in the fashion industry. The main purpose of this research is to generate a conceptual framework on the adaptation of oral traditions into creative practices to uphold folklore in a manner that encourages future generations to embrace and celebrate it. Additionally, this study enables the integration of folklore characteristics into various creative works, supported by thorough research. To achieve this, the study has developed a conceptual framework that offers a systematic approach to delve into any folklore character's core themes. The folklore of *Kuweni* serves as an illustrative example in the development of this framework, which can be applied methodically to explore folklore characters in creative disciplines.

Methodology

The design and conduct of this study have employed a qualitative approach in the initial stage to investigate the symbolic values of *Kuweni*'s folklore through contextual understanding of the story. To study any folk story or character, it is essential to analyse the folklore and documented literature specific to that story. With technological changes, most of the folk

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narratives are now documented as literature. Empirical as well as secondary data are crucial in gaining a comprehensive understanding of folklore. Secondary data related to this study were collected from literature sources, while primary data were collected from two corresponding samples from the Sri Lankan context – scholars and local community, specific to the folklore of *Kuweni*. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative data are considered a source of grounded and rich description of an identifiable local context, which helps to maintain a sequential flow and drive fruitful explanations. In this study, the qualitative approach was helpful for the researcher to capture the "essence" of folklore through background stories and socio-cultural interactions to identify the participants' perspectives of the narrative. This signifies the evolution of folklore as a blend of human experiences and emotions (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Initially, the literature on *Kuweni* was studied, which helped in locating legends about the story. These place legends supported the identification of local communities in those areas. Next, scholars in folklore, history, archaeology, and literature were selected from purposive sampling and initially interviewed using semi-structured interviews to gain meaningful insights. These interviews helped to get an idea about the local communities who have a solid knowledge about this narrative. The interviews with local communities conducted in person, allowing opportunities for discussions and observations alongside the semi-structured interviews, which helped to build a friendly relationship between the participants and the researcher, eliminating any anxious feelings that they might have had (Clarke & Braun, 2019).

With the Covid 19 pandemic situation, most of the interviews with the scholars were done with zoom, skype or telephone conversations. The snowballing technique was used for further identification of participants for both sample categories. The sample size was determined with the research objectives, the amount of variability in the population when the semi-structured interviews were done, the size of the population and time constraints (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). Data collection was primarily based on the ethical clearance granted (EDN/2021/01) by the University Ethics Committee of the University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka. After collecting raw data, techniques of folklore analysis were studied to gain a better understanding of folklore categorizations. The folk literature analysis was viewed under the scientific approach (SA) and social scientific approach (SSA). SA consists of four main areas, while SSA consists of ten main areas to investigate, shaping up the overall folk culture, as shown in figure 01 (Gomme, 1885; Temple, 1886).

The initial themes were selected based on Figure 1 and the literature as well as primary data can be categorized under these main themes. Both SA and SSA introduced by Gomme (1885) and Temple (1886) were used in deductive thematic approach into literature, while the themes were developed by the empirical data itself using the inductive thematic approach. The inductive thematic approach is used to explore new themes adjacent to the deductive thematic approach, to consider the possibility of applying them to data analysis. Therefore, both inductive and deductive approaches in thematic analysis are combined in this research to obtain the research outcomes (Clarke & Braun, 2019). Data analysis is a crucial step in qualitative research, corresponding to the thematic analysis, as it should be rigorously done to avoid pitfalls, given that it is a flexible data analysis technique (Saldaña, 2009). Thus, thematic analysis is a highly appropriate and powerful method to understand and analyze a set of

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experiences, thoughts, and behaviors (Braun, 2018). In this study, manual coding was used instead of computer-aided coding, since there are sentimental values behind the local language and rituals that the community used during the discussions. Regular and repeated observations of similar phenomena, refining, and affirming data with literature, and peer debriefing helped to validate the data provided by the sample groups (The University of Auckland, 2019).

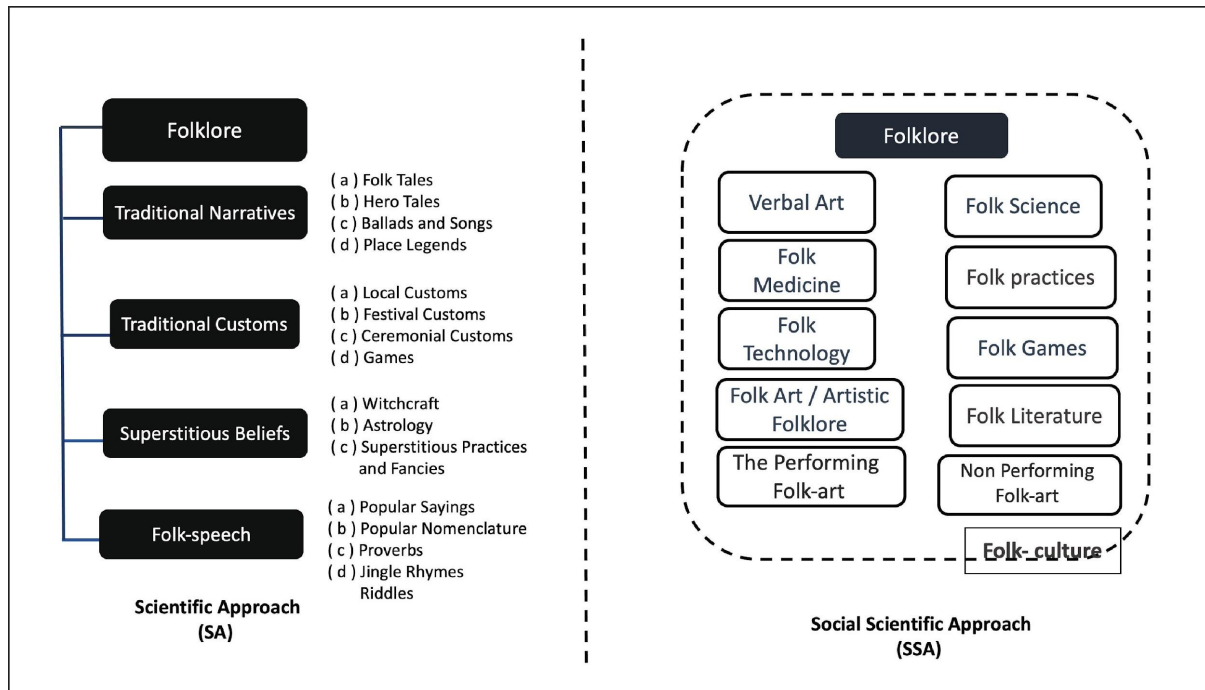


Fig.1 - Scientific Approach (SA) and Social Scientific Approach (SSA) developed by Gomme (1885) and Temple (1886)

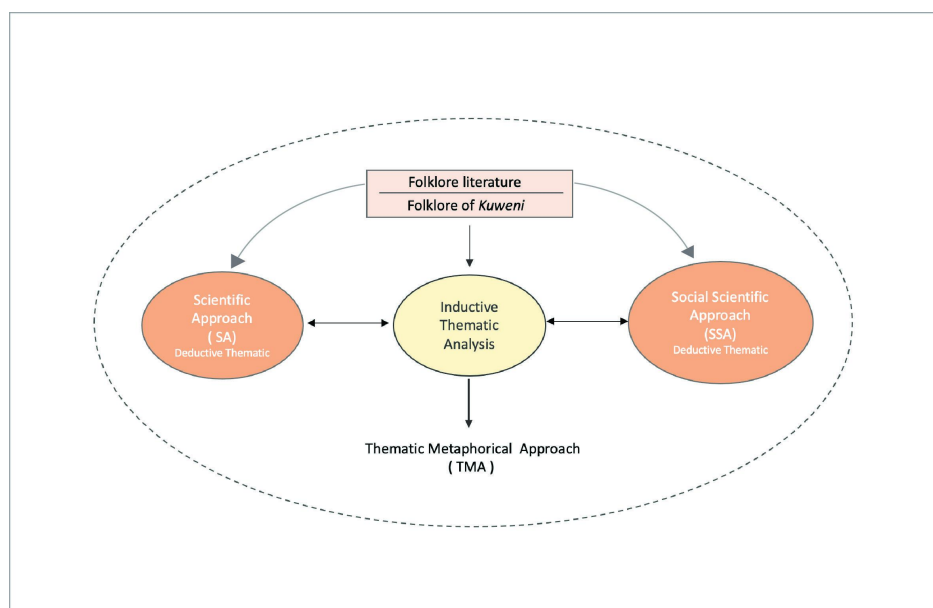


Fig.2 - Thematic Metaphorical Approach (TMA) developed by author

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Results and Discussion

When the empirical and secondary data from literature are subjected to SA, SSA through deductive thematic and inductive thematic approaches, the main themes of the folklore of *Kuweni* can be achieved. As shown in figure 2, this whole process can be identified as the Thematic Metaphorical Approach (TMA). The selected themes from SA, SSA under deductive thematic analysis of literature for the folklore of *Kuweni* with the middle circle (as in figure 2) consists with the themes derived from the inductive thematic analysis of folklore help in creating inter-connections between these three approaches, coming up with the most suitable themes for the oral traditions of *Kuweni* such as place legends, the performing folk art, non performing folk art, local customs, *yakka* tribal young woman, a powerful woman and a mother. In this research, the folklore of *Kuweni* is taken as an example in considering her significance for fashion and textile development. The themes which have been created through the above process can be seen in Figure 3.

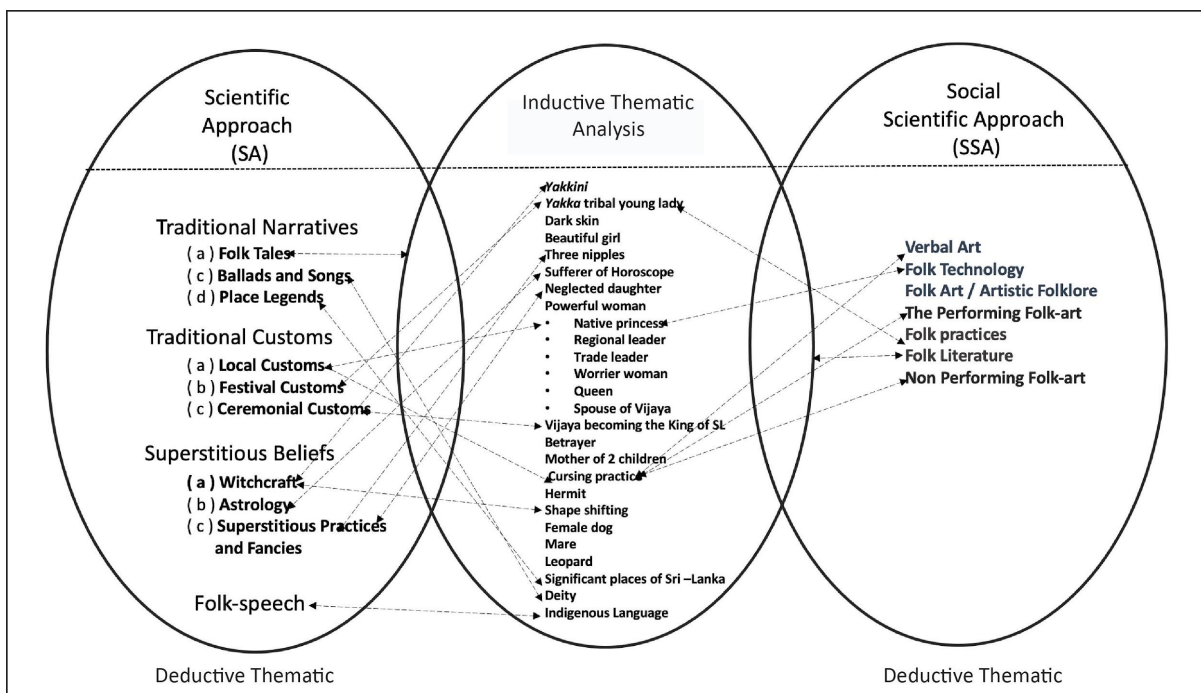


Fig.3 - Cross analysis of SA deductive thematic, Inductive thematic and SSA

Deductive thematic analysis developed by author

As shown in Figure 3, the deductive thematic analysis of SA and SSA reveals interconnections between non-performing folk art and local customs with the cursing practice in the inductive thematic approach. Consequently, the themes in SA and SSA establish connections with the inductive thematic approach to identify main themes and sub-themes related to the story. In creative practices, these themes can be further expanded to uncover the underlying values embedded in them. For instance, the performing folk art practices can be explored through *Kohomba Yak Kankariya* and *Kiri Koraha Netima*, offering a wide array of design elements connected to the story of *Kuweni*. This process facilitates the translation of oral traditions into creative practices through visual interpretations. Likewise, any significant folklore character

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within a socio-cultural system can undergo the TMA to discover informative themes that can be employed in creative practices. Multiple successful themes can be achieved to explore a character from different perspectives. Furthermore, this approach aids in condensing diverse stories into concise forms while still allowing for expansion as needed based on the defined themes.

Conclusion

The lack of oral transmission of folklore can be identified as the main reason for the diminution of folklore in society. Historically, folklore evolved to interconnect people through peculiar practices, experiences, creativity, and knowledge. This interconnection can be consciously and successfully made through creative disciplines such as fashion, drama and theater which play a key role in modern society, allowing individuals to express their unique characters. Culturally, in the modern world, clothing makes a strong connection between people through its distinct visual interpretations. Therefore, the proposed TMA model of folklore analysis from this study helps in extracting and developing unique folklore characteristics with their own distinctive features that can be effectively translated into creative practices. This helps bring the diminishing values of folklore back to society by other means that are more connected with contemporary people and personalities.

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