

DIGITAL FOLKLORE OF CYBORGS

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In the 21st century, the paradigms of communication and community have changed dramatically, even more so in the last decade. Every individual connected to the internet and embedded in online communities, is in one sense or another, a *cyborg*¹ or, a “user”. We are connected to the “world mind” through the several devices that have become indispensable to our existence as social beings. From niche communities discussing anime power tiers to sterile office spaces and hospitals, our communication is mediated through emails, posts, messages and video calls. We are as a species, forever changed, cyborgs reliant on lines of code for almost everything. What the chip shortage during the pandemic has rudely awakened us to, is the shocking number of computers we have in our presence. Everything from cars to washers, is a computer. For a cyborgian culture then, there must be digital folklore, spread across the many threads of the “interwebs”, in subreddits, Facebook groups, Discord servers, YouTube channels, and message boards.

Dominant ideologies of every age and era have in their part tried to negotiate with the existing folklore, co-opting, demonizing, and the whole nine yards. This is seen in the co-option of a cult deity and crocodile god² Sobek, into the main Egyptian pantheon following the rise in the eminence and interest in the land of *Fayyum* (Zecchi, 2010). It is also epitomized in the induction of figures such as Saint Nicolas of Myra, into Christian culture or the literal demonization of many “pagan” figures.

¹ An appropriation of Haraway’s ideas.

² Sobek is not strictly a “crocodile god”. His place in the Egyptian pantheon is extremely complicated, Zecchi’s work mentioned in the references give a more comprehensive picture.

In contemporary times, the dominant ideology of the market continues to constantly appropriate the folkloric in promotional material ranging from jingles to costumes. At its core, folklore is a collection of cultural practices that range from legends to customs, dances, and jokes. By virtue of being an aggregation of the culture of a people, it serves not only to preserve a “past” but also to grow and evolve with the folk. Folklore expands and shifts along with the people and cultures it represents. It is not surprising then that with the dawn of global connectivity and subsequently, numerous pockets of interest-oriented communities in the wake of the internet explosion, elements of the folkloric find themselves in these communities through discursive practices like memes, employed to reflect the experience and expression of users in a rapidly evolving landscape.

Despite a rise in academic interest in the nature and function of memes in online communities, most people still tend to default to the most rudimentary understanding of memes as “those funny pictures on WhatsApp groups”. Memes are much more than that. They are discursive units of culture (Wiggins, 2019) and digital artifacts which facilitate the exchange of cultural information between users. Anderson (1983) situated the creation of large-scale communities in the readership of the printed word. An extrapolation of that position presents interesting avenues for community building with something far more topical, immediate and interactive than print communities. While communities have traditionally been looked at as tied down to ethnicities, religion, and geography, the idea that those factors may not be essential to the formation of communities has become increasingly accepted. Mitra (2002) claims that the only constant vis-a-vis defining communities is that “communities require interaction and involve people”. Memes are semiotic systems which exist multimodally, as image-macros, sounds, videos, phrases, and even plaintext. “Memeing” is essentially a verb; a tradition within participatory digital culture in which people indulge, and which people “perform” in repetition³ to

³ Memes function through reproducibility and recontextualization

reinforce a sense of community. Memes are ubiquitous, from marketing campaigns to election campaigns. Any doubts pertaining to their eminence and prevalence in culture and community building should be dispelled by their monumental, albeit controversial contribution in the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Given the almost ritualistic and communal nature of memes, linkages alluding to the folkloric potential of memes have been observed before. While Gregory Shrempp (2009), focuses almost entirely on the moral implications of memes, he claims that meme theory⁴ “...takes on shades of the same mythological and religious traditions it seeks to discredit”. In its very first conception, the meme already had a folkloric valence to it. For Richard Dawkins (1976), the originator of the term, the meme encompasses musical tunes, clothing, catchphrases, and even religion. What firmly cements the meme in the domain of folklore, however, is Shifman’s (2014) remark that, “Internet memes can be treated as (post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends.” While Shifman doesn’t dwell on it all that much, it opens up an interesting possibility. Due to the orality of folklore and its tendency to shift and change over time, there is rarely if ever any concrete authorial presence in them. In light of this, memes are being looked at as folklore because there is no ascription of authorship to them, that is to say they are communally generated and practiced. Their creators are largely anonymous and they hold in their common usage, no commercial incentives (for the most part).

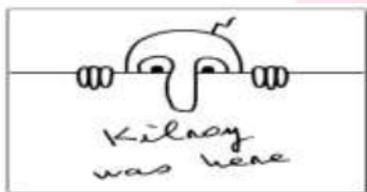
It would make the most sense to focus on arguably the most identifiable element of folklore - Legends. If one were to trace the origin of the tradition of memeing beyond the internet, one would find a near perfect link between traditional legends and meme legends. During the Allied forces’ mobilization through Europe during the Second World War, crude and rudimentary drawings of a bald man with a long nose peeking over a wall started emerging, accompanied by the text “Kilroy was here”.

⁴ He is referring to Dawkins’ entire theory of memes.

This is believed to be the earliest “meme” when we look at it retrospectively with our current understanding of the meme⁵. Like any good folklore legend, the Kilroy legend had many dimensions, many versions and revisions. It remains to this date shrouded in a certain state of mythic ambiguity. Wherever American forces went, throughout the “theatre of war”, the Kilroy meme started showing up. It is said to have emerged from a ship inspector in Quincy by the name of James J. Kilroy who would inspect ships and clear them for use by writing “Kilroy was here” in the most hard-to-reach places on outgoing ships. The American GIs believed it to be a reassuring “talisman” that their ships were checked properly and were safe. The soldiers then adopted this to mark any enemy area they had cleared, adding the doodle along with the text. A meme was thus born. The Germans, including Hitler himself, allegedly believed Kilroy to be some American super-soldier who was decimating his forces. Like every good legend in history, the mythic uncertainty and the symbolism of the Kilroy meme is what made it so pervasive. Even after the war was over, the meme endured⁶.

Figure 1.

Kilroy Was Here



Note. Via <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/kilroy-was-here>, 2013.

Early memes, due to a certain kind of simplicity and clarity⁷, had a very strong folkloric element. Legendary figures such as *Bad Luck Brian* and *Scumbag Steve*

⁵ Meme as understood by Shifman, Milner, and Wiggins.

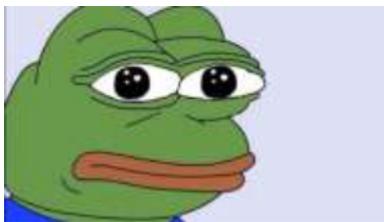
⁶ The Kilroy meme has been rumoured to be in places like the Great Wall of China and Mount Everest. It has also constantly appeared in pop culture, most notably in the T.V. show “Community”.

⁷ Simplicity and clarity here are mentioned because some memes today can be extremely abstract and are impossible to analyse. They do not contain any “meaning” to speak of.

emerged which each captured a certain emotion and expressive mode of the people that used them. Just like how Saint Nicholas was associated with gifts and kindness, *Bad Luck Brian* is the embodiment of terrible luck. Like the many figures in folklore associated with causing inconvenience and ill, *Scumbag Steve* is the embodiment of “mean” behaviour. This trope of “epic heroes” is of course used on the internet, as all things are, with a tinge (or heavy dose) of irony. This results in what I would call ‘Suspended belief in the ironic’. It has been noted throughout the study of many online communities⁸ that it is very difficult to tell if the conversation that takes place is serious or ironic⁹. Users tend to invest themselves in ironic exchanges online, almost as if they believed it to be true, all the while being aware of the satire, sarcasm, and irony at play. Let us take *Pepe the Frog* (Figure 2.), patron saint of right-wing anons on 4chan, as an example. Pepe started off as a cartoon character created by Matt Furie, meant for children. It was, however, quickly hijacked by right wing groups on 4chan. While it is accepted that Pepe is a “fascist meme”, it is not always obvious that it is being used to represent right wing ideas. Pepe has been constantly used ironically to mock the far right but even this mockery relies on an ironic belief in the figure of Pepe as the champion of the far right. A mockery of Pepe, therefore, is a mockery of the far right, precisely because of this ironic belief. The appropriated use of Pepe in political discourse troubled its creator to such an extent that he killed the character. Little did he know, legends only grow after their death. Pepe thrives on 4chan and reddit, and has even bled into the cultural consciousness of cultures on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. The case of Pepe is a very interesting one. The character has been successfully stripped of any authorial control. Furie was never even in the picture, in fact, most people who use Pepe as a reaction image, don’t even know who Furie is. The legend of Pepe the fascist frog is part of the 4chan folklore (and has been identified as a hate symbol¹⁰).

Figure 2.

Pepe the Frog



⁸ From shifman to Milner, almost everyone agrees that whatever happens in online communities, 4chan and reddit in particular, is always at least slightly ambiguous.

⁹ When dealing with internet memes, it is important to remember that the word “irony” is used in its broadest implication and should not be looked at as a literary category.

¹⁰ The Anti-Defamation League identifies Pepe as a hate symbol.

Note. Via <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog>, 2008.

Due to the very nature of the internet, there exists an index of near infinite signs, growing exponentially by the second which encompass all that is being uploaded to the internet. This index then lends itself to be endlessly remixed (recontextualized), replicated, and modified in the form of memes. Certain patterns emerge as users gravitate towards certain sets of signs (Pepe being one of these signs) for an undefinable number of reasons. From these patterns emerge traditions, practices and what we are currently referring to as meme legends. Folklore, as mentioned before, functions on orality which gives room for many versions and revisions of the same figures and tales. This at first seems to be in contrast with the ever-indexing nature of digital media. Everything can be perfectly replicated, there is nearly nothing lost in one image of Pepe from another. And yet Pepe is different in every post or comment. He appears somewhere as a fascist and then somewhere else mocking the same fascist ideals that he is perceived to represent. The other factor contributing to the mutability of legends is time. Legends evolve over a long period of time with the movement of people. This factor of time is almost infinitely hastened in the spread of memes. What might have taken decades if not centuries to spread from one culture to another, due to logistical and geographical limitations of people, is transmitted almost instantaneously. With this instantaneous transmission of content across communities, variations emerge. Individuals and communities impart their own sensibilities onto whatever cultural information they encounter. Although the digital is a perfect replicator, the creativity, imagination, and individuality of people are not perfect replicators of anything. It is important to remember that sharing memes, like telling tales, is not a passive process. It is a conscious discursive act.

To draw a clearer parallel between early memes and folklore, I'd like to use the *Advice Animals* meme. According to their entry on Know Your Meme, a website dedicated to cataloging memes, "Advice Animals...are a type of image macro series

featuring animals of some kind (including humans) that are accompanied by captioned text to represent a character trait or an archetype that fits the role of a "stock character". Advice Animals, both in structure and function appear remarkably similar to the *Yokai* of Japanese folklore, supernatural animals (including humans) that participate in human affairs by way of helping, deceiving, mocking, causing harm, etc. *Advice animals* offer "advice" or deceive users, but they do so sarcastically. The meme functions as intended only when one is suspended in ironic belief. This belief elevates them to a plane similar to that of the *Yokai*. The "cousins" *Courage Wolf* (Figure 3.) and *Insanity Wolf* (Figure 4.) serve as good examples here. While *Courage Wolf* encourages users to "overcome life obstacles", although in an admittedly inappropriate way, *Insanity Wolf*, the darker one, prompts them to do horrible, primarily violent things.

Figure 3.

Courage Wolf



Note. Via <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/courage-wolf>, 2006.

Figure 4.

Insanity Wolf



Note. Via <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/insanity-wolf>, 2009.

Legends in folklore often tend to become part of mainstream cultures like Yokai and Santa Claus, but they also borrow from the mainstream of their time. This holds true for memes as well. The meme, *Ultra Instinct Shaggy* (Figure 5) is a folkloric iteration of the character Shaggy from the Scooby Doo cartoon series. This character moved from mainstream media into meme cultures when the YouTuber Midya¹¹ took a particular scene from the show where shaggy was uncharacteristically heroic and overlaid the theme music for *Dragon Ball Z*¹². The “ultra-instinct” part of the name refers to a state of high power in the Dragon Ball lore. The meme took off and legend grew that the conventionally meek shaggy, who seems to be scared all the time, actually secretly possesses God-like power. This was purely internet lore at this point. In 2021, however, Warner Brothers (the company that owns the Scooby Doo franchise) made a short into animation for *Mortal Kombat*¹³ where one of the characters is grabbed by the neck by none other than *Ultra Instinct Shaggy*. After the video went viral, users agreed that *Ultra Instinct Shaggy* is canon now. A year later, WB officially made the meme part of the canon with the announcement of a game called *Multiverse*, where Shaggy appears with other WB characters, including DC characters like Batman and Superman. While Shaggy retains his meek demeanor, he bursts into “ultra instinct mode” when angered. At this point the lines between folklore and mainstream media begin to blur, which is the whole point. Due to the indexing nature of the internet, anything and everything is ripe for assemblage into mimetic structures and folkloric traditions, resulting in an unending generation and replication of content which matches the dizzying pace of discourse on the internet.

Figure 5.

Ultra Instinct Shaggy

¹¹ The video has since been deleted, but there are reuploads. One of them is cited in the references.

¹² Dragon Ball Z is a Japanese anime/manga series.

¹³ Mortal Kombat is a video game featuring extreme violence and gore.



Note. Via <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ultra-instinct-shaggy>, 2017.

This brings me to my final point. The idea of *lore* is extremely common and prevalent in internet culture. The practice of unearthing “hidden lore” is very common on 4chan and Reddit where users investigate both online and “real world” phenomena and media to reveal hidden messages, secrets, and even plot points, which are collectively referred to as lore. The point of internet lore is that it cannot be verifiably confirmed (for the most part) but communities continue to collectively believe in them. These lores range from popular video games franchises like *Mario*¹⁴ to anime film studios like Studio Ghibli¹⁵ often proposing “evidence” that are in complete juxtaposition to the message of the “original content”. This too are part of the ironic belief mentioned earlier. The relationship between internet lore and folklore is more than merely a semantic one. It reflects the need for communities of all kinds to construct some kind of belief system and social practices around them.

The study of traditional folklore is an important project in understanding cultures and literatures. Similarly, with the ubiquity of the internet and by extension, digital cultures, it becomes extremely important to look at evolving cultural practices that echo folkloric modes of communication and community building. The attempt here was to begin a conversation about the nature of online communities and the need for studying them in order to understand new and emerging dimensions of folklore.

¹⁴ The most watched Mario lore video has over 17 million views.

¹⁵ The most watched Studio Ghibli lore video has 4.1 million views.

While online communities are ontologically disparate from traditional communities, and while the globality of the internet may seem antithetical to folklore, it is important to recognize the splintering of the apparent global community into niche pockets of culturally unique groups built around interests, ideologies, activities, etc. They offer a window into the role of folkloric traditions in the creation and reinforcement of cultures, despite an abundance of information, the instantaneity of communication, and the global scale of the internet.

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