

GORDANA BLAGOJEVIĆ

Institute of Ethnography SASA, Belgrade

gordana.blagojevic@ei.sanu.ac.rs

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7883-8071>

REA KAKAMPOURA

Laboratory of Social Sciences

Department of Pedagogy and Primary Education, School of Education

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

rkakamp@primedu.uoa.gr

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7869-9081>

Folklore in the Digital Age: Continuities and Transformations across Online and Offline Spaces

The thematic issue “Folklore in the Digital Age: Continuities and Transformations Across Online and Offline Spaces” contains seven original scientific papers that deal with different aspects of cultural identities and social interaction in the physical and digital world, using the example of a series of case studies from Serbia and Greece, from the perspective of anthropology and digital folkloristics.¹

Key words: Digital Age, Folklore, Online Space, Offline Space

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Фолклор у дигиталном добу: Континуитети и трансформације у онлајн и офлајн просторима

Тематски број „Фолклор у дигиталном добу: Континуитети и трансформације кроз онлајн и офлајн просторе“ садржи седам оригиналних научних радова који се баве различитим аспектима културних идентитета и друштвене интеракције у физичком и дигиталном свету, користећи пример низа студија случаја из Србије и Грчке, из перспективе антропологије и дигиталне фолклористике.

Кључне речи: дигитално доба, фолклор, онлајн простор, офлајн простор

This thematic issue represents some of the results of the bilateral scientific project “Cultural Identities and Social Interaction in the Physical and Digital World: Case Studies from Serbia and Greece” which the Institute of Ethnography, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts implements in cooperation with the Laboratory of Social Sciences, Department of Pedagogy and Primary Education, School of Education of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA). The project started in May 2023 and is planned to last for four years, until the end of May 2027. The project managers are Dr. Gordana Blagojević, Principal Research Fellow, Institute of Ethnography, SASA on behalf of the Serbian partner, and Dr. Rea Kakampoura, Professor of Folklore Studies, Director of the Laboratory of Social Sciences, NKUA on behalf of the Greek project partner.

In the contemporary world, digital technologies have become deeply embedded in the fabric of everyday life, reshaping how social relationships are formed, maintained, and experienced. From messaging apps to social media platforms, these technologies are not merely tools of communication, but active arenas where identities are negotiated, communities built, and cultural meanings circulated. In this thematic volume, authors approach digital technologies not as isolated innovations, but as culturally situated practices that reflect and reconfigure existing social norms, kinship structures, and forms of belonging. Digital spaces are now integral to processes of ritual, care, political activism, and memory-making, allowing individuals and groups to forge connections across geographic and temporal boundaries. As such, the digital is not a separate realm, but rather a continuation of sociality through new media, shaped by lo-

cal contexts and global flows alike. Studying digital life ethnographically allows us to understand how people inhabit, interpret, and give meaning to their digitally mediated worlds.

The first paper in the thematic issue is Aphrodite-Lidia Nounanaki's paper entitled "'Web 3.0' Memes: Utilizing Deep Fake Technology to Create Memes" in which the author examines memes as a dynamic form of digital folklore within the context of social networking cultures, foregrounding their role in everyday meaning-making and collective commentary. Once characterized by static, text-based imagery, memes have evolved alongside technological shifts, particularly with the emergence of Web 3.0 and mobile-first platforms like TikTok. This transformation reflects broader patterns in digital vernacular creativity, where users continuously negotiate identity, power, and social critique through participatory media. A key development in this trajectory is the adoption of the deep fake technology—a tool rooted in artificial intelligence—to craft hyper-real imitations of public figures for humorous or critical effect. While often associated with disinformation, deepfakes in this context represent a new genre of meme that blends satire, mimicry, and political discourse. By analyzing this emergent practice, the paper situates memes as a living, adaptive form of folklore that both shapes and reflects contemporary cultural anxieties, humor, and resistance in the digital public sphere.

In their paper "Digital Folk Narrative Genres in Crisis Management: Student Digital Memes Concerning the Tempe Accident" George Katsadoros and Evilena Kardamila deal with internet memes as a form of contemporary digital folklore and collective expression within Greek popular culture, focusing on their role in articulating student responses to the 2023 Tempe train disaster. As a tragic event that claimed the lives of many higher education students, the Tempe crash became a pivotal moment of national mourning and reflection, particularly among Greece's student population. Drawing from a sample of memes circulated on Greek social media platforms between March 2023 and May 2024, this research applies a thematic and semiotic analysis to examine how students, as a distinct social group, employed digital humor and symbolism to process grief, critique authority, and reaffirm group identity. The memes are analyzed not only as texts, but as cultural artefacts embedded in the socio-political context of the post-crisis Greece, where digital platforms serve as spaces for both resistance and emotional coping. Through this lens, the paper situates memes as a vernacular mode of expression that captures shifting youth sensibilities, shared affect, and the negotiation of collective trauma in the digital public sphere. In doing so, it contributes to broader

anthropological discussions on digital culture, mourning practices, and the evolving forms of youth political engagement in Southern Europe.

Sonja Žakula's paper titled "The People's Pygmy Princess and Female Rage: Memes Featuring Moo-Deng" explores the viral phenomenon of Moo-Deng, a female pygmy hippopotamus born in the summer of 2024 at Khao Kheow Open Zoo in Thailand, whose digital representations have transcended conservation messaging to become sites of collective meaning-making in the global online culture. Initially introduced to the public as part of an awareness campaign for endangered species, Moo-Deng's expressive facial features and endearing presence quickly transformed her into a meme and object of fan-generated art. Drawing on a corpus of Instagram content—including memes, captions, and illustrations—this study examines how Moo-Deng has become entangled with affective expressions of "female rage", a sentiment that is often culturally constrained, yet here finds articulation through the visual and symbolic register of a non-human animal. By foregrounding the meme as a vernacular and visual form of digital folklore, this analysis situates Moo-Deng within broader anthropological conversations on multispecies relations, gendered affect, and the cultural work of cuteness. The paper also explores how human audiences assign emotional legibility and gendered narratives to animal expressions in the digital sphere, revealing the ways in which animals become both symbolic vessels and active participants in the construction of contemporary social imaginaries.

On the other hand, Maria G. Kokolaki in her paper "Online Interweaving of Sense of Place and Local Heritage: Challenges and Implications for the Digital Instantiation and Negotiation of Local Identity in Two Cretan Villages" explores the evolving concept of "sense of place" in the context of digital communication technologies, focusing on how local identity and cultural heritage are rearticulated through social media. Centered on the villages of Sissi and Vrachassi in Eastern Crete—communities shaped by tourism and broader socio-economic transformations since the late 20th century—the study draws on both online and ethnographic fieldwork to investigate processes of digital placemaking. By examining Facebook groups and other online forums, the research considers how residents and diasporic community members engage in the symbolic construction and circulation of local heritage, selectively emphasizing particular elements of landscape, memory, and tradition. These digital representations, often marked by nostalgia and idealization, contribute to the formation of a shared local identity that transcends physical boundaries. The study interrogates how cultural meanings are mediated, ne-

gotiated, and extended into virtual spaces, demonstrating that sense of place is not fixed but continually reconstituted through everyday digital practices. In doing so, it contributes to anthropological understandings of place, heritage, and community in the age of networked communication.

In Ursula-Helen Kassaveti's paper titled "Home Movies as Visual Folklore: Reconstructing the "Tavros" Religious Fair in Lesvos through Digitized VHS Collections on YouTube" the focus is on vernacular audiovisual documentation as a mode of local ethnographic practice, focusing on the home video recordings of Spyros Koukossis, an electronics shop owner from the village of Agia Paraskevi on the island of Lesvos. Between 1984 and 2009, Koukossis used a VHS camera to record the annual "Tavros" religious festival dedicated to Agios Charalampos, producing a body of footage that visually archives local ritual, performance, and sociality. While the recordings initially appear similar to commercial or touristic media, they diverge in both aesthetics and intention, reflecting an amateur, emplaced perspective shaped by a desire to document community life from within. Now digitized and shared on YouTube, these videos serve as a rich entry point for exploring how non-professional technologies and personal motivations contribute to the preservation and reinterpretation of cultural memory. Adopting a qualitative, anthropological lens, the paper situates Koukossis's work within broader discussions of media as memory-making practice, the politics of representation in rural Greece, and the evolving role of local actors in curating and circulating ethnographic knowledge. In doing so, it highlights how grassroots media can function as both an archive and artifact, shaping the ways communities remember, display, and narrate their cultural selves.

In her paper "From Stall to Wire: Meeting Couples and Getting Married in Novi Pazar" Nina Aksić traces the historical and cultural transformations in courtship practices among young couples in Novi Pazar and its surrounding villages, from the early 20th century to the present day. Situated within a multicultural and multi-confessional region of south-western Serbia, this ethnographic study compares the evolving norms and expectations of romantic relationships across Muslim and Christian communities. By examining the intersections of local custom, religious doctrine, and broader socio-political changes, the paper explores how practices of matchmaking, dating, and marriage have been shaped by both tradition and modernity. Particular attention is dedicated to the shifting role of intermediaries—once embodied in family members or matchmakers, now increasingly replaced or supplemented by digital platforms such as social media and dating applications. These new modes of

interaction are considered in light of both the increased individualization of partner selection and the emergence of anti-social tendencies associated with digital socialization. Despite these changes, the research identifies enduring cultural threads: the persistent presence of an intermediary role and the deeply rooted desire for emotional and spiritual companionship. In centering local voices and historical memory, the study contributes to broader anthropological discussions on kinship, intimacy, and the adaptive resilience of courtship practices in plural societies.

Dordina Trubarac Matić in her paper “Communication in Heroic Decasyllable in Contemporary Serbian Language” explores the contemporary recontextualisation of the “heroic decasyllable” (*epski deseterac*), a metrical form historically rooted in Serbian epic oral tradition and typically performed with the accompaniment of the *gusle*. Once central to the transmission of collective memory, heroism, and moral codes among South Slavic communities, heroic decasyllable today finds new resonance in digital spaces, where it is repurposed as a dynamic mode of expression across internet platforms and social media. Drawing on ethnographic and linguistic analysis, this study examines how modern Serbian and Serbian-Montenegrin populations engage with this poetic register in everyday digital communication, adapting a traditional oral form to address a broad range of contemporary themes—from political satire and social critique, to expressions of identity and humor. By situating this phenomenon within the broader anthropological frameworks of language pragmatics, performance, and digital folklore, the paper highlights how heroic decasyllable functions not only as a stylistic tool, but as a socially embedded communicative practice that bridges past and present. Ultimately, this research sheds light on the ongoing vitality of oral traditions in new media environments, and the ways in which communities negotiate continuity, creativity, and cultural belonging through linguistic form.

In both Greek and Serbian societies, digital technologies have become integral to daily life, reshaping social interactions, work, and cultural expression, offering unprecedented opportunities for connection, information, and creativity. Yet, from an anthropological and folklorist perspective, these changes also bring complex challenges. The pervasive presence of digital media can blur boundaries between public and private spheres, alter patterns of social interaction, and generate new forms of surveillance and control. Moreover, access to and literacy with digital tools remain uneven, producing new inequalities that reflect and sometimes exacerbate the existing social divides. The fast-paced, al-

gorithm-driven nature of online environments can disrupt traditional rhythms of sociality, impacting practices of attention, memory, and trust. Anthropological and folklorist inquiry into these challenges emphasizes the lived experiences of individuals and communities as they navigate tensions between innovation and continuity, agency and constraint, within digitally mediated worlds. This approach reveals how people creatively negotiate, resist, or accommodate the pressures of digital life in ways deeply embedded in local cultural logics.

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