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Sovereign Interrogators: Fostering Prompt Literacy and Artificial Intelligence Audits in Decolonial Folklore Pedagogy

This perspective essay advocates integrating prompt literacy, the art of crafting theoretically informed, culturally grounded questions for generative artificial intelligence, into folklore pedagogy from a decolonial, Global South standpoint. Drawing on courses taught in Bahir Dar University's Folklore PhD program, this essay presents a model in which artificial intelligence becomes a dialogic tool for critical interrogation through the prompt audit, a structured method for analyzing artificial intelligence responses to decode their embedded cultural assumptions. This practice is guided by ethno-computational thinking (ECT), an applied methodology that uses folkloristic sensibilities to decode cultural biases within computational systems. Through this framework, the essay demonstrates how folklorists can uphold cultural sovereignty and position themselves as sovereign interrogators.

Keywords (from the AFS Ethnographic Thesaurus and Library of Congress Subject Headings):
Folklore study and teaching, digital folklore, artificial intelligence, cultural sovereignty, decolonization, research—moral and ethical aspects, audits, Global South

The Inflection Point and Interrogative Competence

The *Journal of American Folklore*'s call for a themed issue on artificial intelligence (AI) and folklore arrives at a disciplinary inflection point, where the most pressing skill may be neither coding nor data science, but the ancient, humanistic art of asking better questions (JAF Editorial Collective 2025). Generative artificial intelligence, capable of producing text, image, and narrative that mimic cultural forms, presents folklorists with a paradoxical tool, one that reflects the vast cultural data it has consumed, but that also, however, fundamentally lacks the lived experience, ethical sensibility, and contextual nuance that defines our field. The central

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challenge, therefore, is not whether to use AI, as it is already embedded in the digital ecosystems where folklore circulates, but how to question its work effectively and ethically.

This perspective essay engages the theme of this issue from a vital, alternative vantage point: the context of designing and delivering advanced folklore education in Ethiopia, a nation defined by profound and living oral, spiritual, and material heritage. My argument is grounded in the Indigenous knowledge systems and community-centric practices that have shaped Ethiopian folklore scholarship, as articulated in my foundational work on the nature and scope of folklore (Solomon 2015), and it insists that artificial intelligence be met with rigorous, sovereignty-protecting critique. My perspective is further informed by my dual role over the past seven years as the instructor of a core course, Folklore and Contemporary Issues (Folk7012), and as a member of the curriculum development committee for Bahir Dar University's Folklore PhD program.

This essay is further informed by my doctoral ethnographic research on the living pilgrimage rituals at the Dirre Sheikh Hussein shrine (Solomon 2018), which serves as the foundational case study for this pedagogical model. This experience reveals that successful integration of AI must be fundamentally reoriented from teaching mere tool-using competency to fostering what I term *interrogative competence*, the cultivated ability of users to engage generative AI through culturally grounded, performative questioning that centers community sovereignty and exposes algorithmic bias.

This user competence rests on two interconnected practices I introduce here: *prompt literacy*, the ability to effectively understand, craft, refine and critically evaluate the text-based instructions given to generative artificial intelligence systems (such as ChatGPT, Deepseek, Grok, Claude or Midjourney), and the *prompt audit*, a structured method for analyzing artificial intelligence responses to decode their embedded cultural assumptions. Together, they form a coherent methodology: prompt literacy serves as the theoretical lens, framing questioning as a speech act, while the prompt audit serves as the practical application, the forensic investigation of artificial intelligence outputs. Both are operationalized through the framework of *ethno-computational thinking* (ECT), an applied methodology of using folkloristic sensibilities, theories, and methods to decode the cultural assumptions, biases, and logics embedded within computational systems and their outputs.

Interrogative competence is anchored in prompt literacy as a core folkloristic practice. Building on the Ethiopian folkloristic tradition's deep engagement with performative language, and its understanding of the folklorist as a skilled interlocutor, one who knows the art of asking questions that elicit authentic, culturally meaningful responses, I theorize the prompt not as a neutral query but as a performative speech act (Austin 1962) that actively shapes the reality of the response.

In folkloristic terms, crafting a prompt is analogous to the skilled elicitation techniques of a fieldworker prompting a narrative performance or the contextualized utterance of a ritual

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specialist (Bauman 1977); it is a form of digital incantation that positions the interlocutor and directs the narrative. In the Ethiopian tradition, text, texture, and context are understood as interrelated elements of communicative practice (Solomon 2015); applying this framework to artificial intelligence, the prompt becomes the "text," the artificial intelligence's response the "performance," and the prompt audit the "contextual analysis" that reveals embedded cultural assumptions. This theoretical grounding elevates prompt literacy from a technical skill to a methodological practice central to folkloristics, framing the folklorist as a sovereign interlocutor engaging in critical dialogue with the algorithmic "other."

The Ethiopian scholarly tradition, with its deep engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems and community-centric practice (Solomon 2015), offers a necessary counternarrative to techno-utopianism. This tradition calls for AI to be met with rigorous, sovereignty-protecting critique, a call that is particularly urgent in contexts where cultural heritage has historically been extracted, exoticized, or misrepresented.

To this end, I introduce and operationalize *ethno-computational thinking* (ECT). Unlike generic computational thinking, which focuses on problem-solving through abstraction and automation, ECT is a critical, reflexive practice. ECT is an applied methodology using folkloristic sensibilities, theories, and methods to decode the cultural assumptions, biases, and logics embedded within computational systems and their outputs—for instance, analyzing why an AI generates a stereotype or what its failure to describe a syncretic ritual reveals about its training data.

This methodology extends the Ethiopian concept of folk knowledge—locally rooted, socially institutionalized, and derived from experiential practice—to the domain of computational systems (Solomon 2015). Just as folk knowledge represents a community's accumulated wisdom about its environment, transmitted through practice and experience, ECT applies these same sensibilities—grounded observation, community-centered critique, and practical engagement—to decode the cultural assumptions embedded in artificial intelligence outputs. Building on digital folkloristics (Blank 2009; Tangherlini 2016) and engaging posthuman frames (Thompson 2019), this model reframes proficiency not as technical mastery but as hermeneutic proficiency: the cultivated ability to interpret, interrogate, and govern algorithmic systems through culturally profound questioning.

A Pedagogical Blueprint: Embedding Prompt Literacy and Ethno-Computational Thinking

The PhD program in Folklore at Bahir Dar University, launched in 2020, was established to address a documented national need for scholars capable of safeguarding Ethiopia's diverse intangible heritage (Bahir Dar University 2020). Its senate-approved curriculum, with its deep grounding in ethnography, commitment to community-based research, and focus on Indigenous epistemologies, provides an essential humanistic and ethical ground from which to critically evaluate digital tools. The explicit inclusion of a "Folklore and Technology" component in the

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Folk7012, Folklore and Contemporary Issues course, creates a legitimate entry point for critical AI engagement (Bahir Dar University 2025).

AI integration into folklore courses must be strategic and additive. Rather than treating AI as a standalone topic, the department positioned it as a subtheme within the existing "Folklore and Technology" component of Folk7012, and also incorporated it across all other courses as a practice of critical questioning, prompt literacy, woven into existing theory, methods, and field courses to transform AI from a search engine into a sparring partner for the folkloristic mind.

The core pedagogical instrument for this literacy training is the prompt audit, which is a structured exercise where students design a series of prompts, analyze the AI's responses, and thereby decode the cultural and epistemological assumptions embedded in the system. Through this process, they learn to identify the underlying biases and structural training patterns; for instance, how the artificial intelligence defaults to Western categorical templates ("saint," "historical figure") that flatten syncretic identities. This approach, designed with Global South constraints—including limited and unreliable internet access in rural field sites, resource constraints for accessing proprietary artificial intelligence tools, and intermittent electricity—is the primary vehicle for training students in ethno-computational thinking.

Case Study: Operationalizing ECT Through a Prompt Audit on Dirre Sheikh Hussein

Folk7011: Debates on Folklore Theories and Approaches—Artificial Intelligence as Theoretical Provocateur

This course already exists in the PhD curriculum; a seminar on "Algorithmic Tradition and Authorship" is proposed as a new addition to it, where students engage in a multistage prompt exercise (adapted from my course materials) designed to reveal the gap between pattern-matching and understanding**.**

Audit Task: In the audit exercise, students craft three distinct prompts, each embedded within a different theoretical lens. The first, hagiographic prompt asks the artificial intelligence to "Tell the story of Sheikh Hussein of Bale as a great Islamic saint and founder of a holy shrine." This typically generates a generic Muslim saint narrative, erasing the Sufi Islamic layer. The second, historical-critical prompt asks for "a historical analysis of Sheikh Hussein of Bale, distinguishing between documented history, legendary narratives, and the sociopolitical motivations for his saintly veneration," which often produces a positivist account privileging "documented history" over oral tradition.

The third, syncretic-performative prompt challenges the artificial intelligence to analyze Sheikh Hussein "not as a singular historical figure, but as a 'syncretic persona' ... where *Waaqeffanna* (Oromo folk religion) cosmology, Sufi Islam, and localized saint veneration converge," presenting the greatest challenge, with the AI frequently defaulting to simplistic lists or incoherence.

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It is at this stage that ethno-computational thinking is concretely applied. Students are guided to decode the outputs by examining the artificial intelligence's failure as a cultural artifact that reveals the epistemic violence of categorization inherent in its architecture. The AI's training data and models are structured around discrete, often Western, categorical templates ("saint," "historical figure") that cannot process nonbinary, syncretic identities. Through this audit, students practice ECT by reading AI output not for content, but for form, bias, and omission, becoming forensic analysts of digital culture.

The prompt audit not only trains students in critical thinking but also generates valuable data for artificial intelligence developers. By systematically documenting AI "failures," such as its inability to represent syncretic identities or its reliance on reductive categorical templates, folklorists can provide the critical feedback needed to build more culturally nuanced models. ECT thus positions folklorists not merely as critics of algorithmic systems but as essential partners in their development. This is especially urgent for the creation of small-scale, open-source language models for Ethiopian languages, where community-governed alternatives can counter dependency on opaque, extractive platforms.

Expanding ECT Across the Curriculum

The framework for applying ethno-computational thinking is scalable across the folklore studies curriculum**,** extending beyond the Dirre Sheikh Hussein case study to other core courses in the PhD program.

Folk7012: Folklore and Contemporary Issues Course: The Prompt Audit as Core Competency. My course provides the ideal structure for cultivating prompt audits as a core component. Students undertake a critical prompt engineering challenge regarding the tradition of *Zār* spirit possession. *Zār* refers both to the traditional spirit possession folk belief and to the possessing spirit itself.

The exercise asks students to design three distinct prompts: one designed to elicit a stereotyped, orientalist description; a second to elicit a clinically anthropological, functionally reductive account; and a third crafted to elicit a response respectful of the tradition's lived spiritual, therapeutic, and social context. Students execute these prompts, compare the outputs, and write an analysis of what their prompt engineering reveals about cultural representation, agency, and bias in large language models.

Table 1. Prompt Audit for the *Zār* Tradition: Eliciting and Analyzing Representational Frames

Prompt Type	Example Prompt	Hallmark of AI Output	Folkloristic Insight

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Stereotyped/ Orientalist	Describe the exotic *Zār* possession ritual in Ethiopia by specifying one ethnic group.	Emphasis on "trance," "frenzy," "ancient superstition," sensationalized imagery.	Reveals AI's latent colonial and exoticizing tropes embedded in training data.
Reductive/ Functionalist	Analyze the socioeconomic functions of *Zār* spirit possession groups.	Dry, systemic analysis, framing practice as a mechanism for social cohesion or stress relief.	Exposes AI's propensity for Western anthropological reductionism, stripping spiritual meaning.
Respectful/Contextual	Discuss *Zār* as a lived spiritual and therapeutic system in contemporary Ethiopia, citing emic perspectives on its healing and social functions.	More nuanced output acknowledging agency but often falters on deep cultural logic and specific emic terms.	Tests AI's ability to handle complex, non-Western ontologies. Failure points highlight gaps in training data and the irreplaceable need for human expertise.

This exercise makes the act of questioning itself a direct application of folkloristic knowledge. It trains students to see the prompt not as a neutral query, but as a performative speech act, an utterance-changing social reality that shapes reality. The audit table becomes a diagnostic tool, moving the lesson from abstract ethics to forensic analysis. Students learn to reverse-engineer the artificial intelligence's cultural assumptions by analyzing the correlation between their input phrasing and the system's output, thereby mastering the prompt as a lever for interrogating algorithmic representation.

Folk7011: Debates on Folklore Theories and Approaches Course: AI as Theoretical Provocateur. This course already exists; the seminar on "Algorithmic Tradition and Authorship" is proposed as a new addition to it, where students would engage in a multistage prompt exercise designed to reveal the gap between pattern-matching and understanding:

1. Stage 1 (Baseline): Generate a Gurage trickster tale involving the figure of *Murchine* (a clever trickster man who outsmarts villagers).

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2. Stage 2 (Contextual Demand): Regenerate the tale incorporating the specific socio-ecological context of *Enset* plant *(Ensete ventricosum* or false banana) agriculture and its associated labor rhythms.

3. Stage 3 (Hermeneutic Challenge): Explain the cultural logic behind the protagonist's transformation in the tale you just generated. What values does this transformation encode?

This sequential interrogation engages directly with conceptions of Posthuman folklore (Thompson 2019). The AI's failure to provide a coherent explanation in Stage 3, which will likely offer generic statements about "moral lessons," becomes the teachable moment. It illuminates how tradition encodes specific ecological knowledge and social relations that exist outside the AI's training corpus, thus training students in ethno-computational thinking.

Folk7023 Advanced Method in Folklore Research Course: ECT Guides Meta-Questioning. Exercises like using a large language model to analyze citation patterns in scholarship on the Oromo *Gadaa* system (the traditional Oromo age-grade sociopolitical institution) train students to decode biases in the field's own knowledge production. Exercises include using an LLM to identify which linguistic communities' perspectives appear underrepresented based on author affiliation or language of publication.

Folk7024 Advanced Field Method in the Study of Folklore Course: ECT Informs a Dialogic Approach. Students use AI image generators to visualize ethnographic descriptions. The inevitably erroneous images are taken back to community collaborators as a provocation for deeper emic explanation. This methodology transforms artificial intelligence into a powerful tool for triggering collaborative refinement, centering community agency as the final arbiter of meaning.

Folk7026/7027 Doctoral Seminar and Dissertation. Students pursue ethics-led innovations guided by ECT, such as fine-tuning small language models on curated corpora of *Qene* (poetic hymns of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church) or using network analysis AI to identify nodes in epic cycles for deeper interpretation.

The Ethical Imperative: Sovereign Questioning as Decolonial Practice

The pedagogical model described above depends on an uncompromising ethical framework that enacts ethno-computational thinking as a form of decolonial practice, and therefore responds to the AFS Statement on Ethics (American Folklore Society 1988), particularly its principles of "respect for the dignity, privacy, and well-being of individuals and communities" and the obligation to "represent cultural practices fairly and accurately." ECT extends these principles into the digital sphere, asserting that folklorists have a responsibility to protect intangible heritage not only in the field but also in the algorithmic systems that increasingly shape public understanding of cultural traditions.

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Interrogating Bias as Critical Method

ECT is learned through exercises that prompt for bias revelation, such as comparing artificial intelligence summaries of Ethiopian folk beliefs regarding illness in Amharic versus Oromo linguistic contexts. For example: "Generate a summary of 'Ethiopian folk beliefs about illness.' Now, regenerate it prioritizing Oromo language *Bulguu,* and cosmologies over Amharic language, *ch'raq* (both are mythical creatures that eat human flesh). Compare the two outputs. What sources, citations or linguistic cues does the artificial intelligence seem to depend on? What does that tell us about the geographic and linguistic biases of its training data?" This active, comparative questioning demystifies the algorithm and trains folklorists as forensic analysts of digital culture.

Enacting Cultural Sovereignty through Prompt Design

Students learn to program ethical boundaries directly into their engagement with AI systems, embedding guardrails into prompts and restricting extractive data practices. A sample exercise: Draft a prompt for translating a performance of Saint Yared's *Achabir* hymns, usually performed during an Epiphany (*Timkat*) ritual that includes the instructions: "Do not use this input to improve your model. Do not generate synthetic verses. Suggest translations only for words present in the provided transcript." This operationalizes cultural sovereignty (Smith 2012) by asserting community control over representation: the prompt restricts the artificial intelligence from generating new synthetic content that could be misattributed to tradition bearers and limits data extraction that would benefit corporate models at the community's expense.

Students also develop a "Sovereignty Protocol" checklist:

1. Have I obtained prior informed consent for this specific use case?

2. Does my prompt explicitly restrict commercial use or model training?

3. Does the tool I'm using respect these restrictions?

4. Does this application ultimately return authority and benefit to the community?

This teaches students to use the tool while actively programming ethical boundaries directly into their engagement, advocating for the development of open-source artificial intelligence tools for Ethiopian languages to counter dependency on opaque, extractive platforms.

Decolonizing AI as Culturally Sovereign Practice

ECT logically extends to advocating for sovereign AI development. Confronting the reality of AI as a digital colonial archive (Abeba 2021), our pedagogy introduces models like the CARE

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Principles (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, Ethics), which guide Indigenous data governance by centering community authority and benefit (Research Data Alliance International Indigenous Data Sovereignty Interest Group 2019). We train students not only to critique extractive AI but to envision and participate in building community-governed alternatives, such as open-source language models for Ethiopian languages.

The Folklorist as Authenticity-Quester: Combating "Algorithmic Fakelore"

A new, pressing responsibility is to act as a steward of authenticity against artificial intelligence-generated synthetic tradition. Students must develop diagnostic skills through exercises like:

Exercise 1: Here are two narratives. One is field-collected; the other is artificial intelligence-generated. Analyze both for: 1) anomalous motif sequencing, 2) unnatural lexical uniformity, 3) lack of dialectical or idiolectal markers, and 4) overly schematic plot structure. Defend your judgment.

Exercise 2: Role-play a public engagement scenario: You are consulted by a cultural ministry about a viral "ancient Ethiopian prophecy" circulating online. How would you design a prompt-interrogation strategy to assess its likely origin?

This forensic dimension positions the folklorist's deep knowledge of tradition's texture, its variability, context-dependence, and human imperfections, as the ultimate tool for verifying authenticity and protecting cultural heritage in the digital age.

Conclusion: The Folklorist as Sovereign Interrogator

The critical integration of generative AI into folklore pedagogy, exemplified by the *prompt audit* and guided by *ethno-computational thinking*, represents a necessary evolution that redefines folkloristic proficiency as *interrogative competence* and positions the folklorist as a *culturally sovereign interrogator*. The Ethiopian folkloristic tradition has long understood the folklorist as a skilled interlocutor who knows the art of asking questions that elicit authentic, culturally meaningful responses, and who understands the relationship between performer, audience, and context (Solomon 2015). This tradition provides the foundation for the model of *sovereign interrogation* I propose. By training folklorists to be master questioners and ethical co-creators, we prepare them not just to use a new tool, but to govern the conversation with it, to audit its cultural representations, and to build alternatives that serve community-defined sovereignty. The prompt audit, in particular, generates valuable data for artificial intelligence developers—documenting artificial intelligence "failures" and providing the critical feedback needed for more culturally nuanced models. This model, grounded in the Ethiopian context yet applicable across the Global South, offers a vital decolonial contribution to the international dialogue on artificial intelligence and folklore pedagogy, demonstrating how Global South perspectives can reframe technology as a tool for cultural sovereignty rather than extraction. The future of folklore in the

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algorithmic age will belong to those who can ask the questions that reveal the sovereign truth of human tradition questions that the algorithm, on its own, can neither ask nor answer.

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Table 1 Alt-text: Four-column table comparing three prompt types; Stereotyped/Orientalist, Reductive/Functionalist and Respectful/Contextual, with example prompts, typical AI output hallmarks and folkloristic insights.

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