

# Visualizing Heritage: Culturally Accurate Storytelling in Pakistani Mythology and Folklore

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**Abstract** - The research maintains the imposing influence of visuals and imagery in storytelling and establishes the importance of cultural authenticity in representing mythological and folkloric elements. By extracting relevant visuals, this research endeavours to forge a stronger relation and familiarity between storytellers, artists, and their audience, eventually establishing cultural identity and shared values in Pakistan. Collection methods of secondary data is carried out by the study of books, online forums, publications and articles, have been utilized to gather a plethora of information. This content forms the basis for the creation of culturally significant characters and showcases the overall design process. By uplifting these visuals in creative industries, the project highlights the potential room for economic growth through products and media that are culturally rich.

**Keywords** - folklore, mythology, character design, character development, character design, iconography, visual references



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## 1. Introduction

This study creates a collection of culturally inspired creatures rooted in Pakistani mythology, utilizing modern technology. By digitally reinterpreting these mythologies beings, the study seeks to bridge the cultural gap in art and entertainment, preserving and revitalizing traditional narratives for contemporary audiences. Such characters can be employed by various industries including television, tourism, and education. This suggests that pictures, graphics, and motions are the most influential mediums of expression for stories and that the messages and the themes of the mythology and folklore are best represented through visual and other sensory methods. Through the means of appropriate imagery, artists and storytellers are able to make the audience more familiar to the piece and enhance their cultural identity. This particular project focuses on the illustrated characters as a medium of cultural representation. It addresses the issues of the creation of the character and the associated processes. People have a broader access to picture book characters and their stories. We used the practical approach of collecting and categorizing significant data through the use of

secondary data collection such as studying books and publishing as well as online sources like classrooms, forums and articles. The project aims to create a digital collection of illustrations, of creatures and identities from Pakistani mythology and folklore to provide visual references to aid the field of arts and entertainment. By using culturally accurate visuals and imagery, the study aims to reinforce cultural identity and shared values. The study explores the process of cultural expression through character design.

### 1.1 Objectives

1. To learn the techniques and methods of character designing used by the best animation studios & illustrators around the world
2. To explore visual art styles, present in Pakistani culture and create/implement a specific art style for the execution of the project
3. To study visual references such as traditional clothing, architecture, and symbolism to help in creating the character design guideline.
4. To design and illustrate individual mythology & folklore characters which are culturally accurate to their region of origin in Pakistan.

### 1.2 Significance of the Study

Visual references are required by artists for cultural illustrations, as it allows them to accurately portray cultural heritage with respect. Through depicting traditional clothing, structures, and symbols, the context of the historical artwork is being authenticated. This not only increases the concern of authenticity of the artwork but also allows the culture of the artwork to be shared widely, leading to great admiration of various traditions. As opposed to digital media which is filled with images of Greek gods and Indian deities along with Japanese yokai, Pakistan on the other hand has little to almost no representation of any Pakistani mythological characters that can be depicted.

Since there are negligible visual references are present for Pakistani mythology and folklore, the cultural representation we see in our digital media is highly influenced by Western imagery.<sup>1</sup> To address this, we have developed an accessible database where artists and storytellers are able to find visuals created using the proper semiotics and visual rhetoric of our culture. Through this study the lack of visual references of mythology and folklore, especially in the field of arts & entertainment are countered. The designed and illustrated characters may also be used by television, education and tourism. This study paves a way to counter our lack of visual and cultural expression, especially in digital media by enabling artists and enthusiasts to find visuals created using the apt iconography of Pakistan. Through visual references, artists can create culturally relevant artwork that glorifies the richness and diversity of the world of art, while also preserving and promoting cultural heritage for future generations.<sup>2</sup> The project can be beneficial for educational and art institutes.

Iconography

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<sup>1</sup> S Abbas, ““Folklore and Mythology of Pakistan: An Overview,” ” *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research* 3, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> S Thompson, “*Folk Art and Folklore Illustrations: Cultural Representation in Visual Storytelling* (” *Journal of Folk Studies*, 2012).

For our project, we studied the ‘Panofsky-Shatford facet matrix for describing image context<sup>1</sup>’ which was presented in 1986.<sup>3</sup>

*The Panofsky-Shatford facet matrix for describing image content (Shatford, 1986)*

	<b>Pre-Iconography (Generics)</b>	<b>Iconography (Specifics)</b>	<b>Iconology Interpretation</b>
<b>Person or thing</b>	Individually named person animals and things	Kinds of persons, animals, things	[Mythical being] Abstraction manifested or symbolized by objects or beings
<b>Action, or state</b>	Individual names or events	Actions or conditions	[emotion, abstract, ideas] manifested by actions
<b>Place</b>	geographic locations	Kind of place or architecture	Place symbolized abstractions manifest by locale
<b>Time</b>	Time, dates or periods	Cyclical time, season or time of day	Emotions or abstraction symbolized and manifested
<b>Visual elements</b>	[shapes, colors] square, red, colourful		
<b>Non subject matter</b>	[author, style nationality, uncategorized]		

Figure 1. The Panofsky-Shatford Facet Matrix

After careful understanding, we modified the table by keeping in mind the variables and findings of our research. The adapted version of the table from Panofsky-Shatford facet matrix, helps in deciding the order and categorization of the data collected from literature review during the data collection process. It also helps in the formulation and design of the individual character designs as we filled it separately for each mythological and folk’s best suitable for creating three different variations of each character design;

*Variation A-* focusing more on the artist’s interpretation of the data

*Variation B-* centred around the place of origin of the character and its location-related abstractions

*Variation C-* leaning more towards the visual elements of the character.

## 2. Database art & design theory

Database design involves classifying data and identifying interrelationships. Database art is a form of digital art that uses the digital archive as both a source of artistic

Imagination and a form of critical inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.1 Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics describe, show and summarize the basic features of a dataset found in a given study, presented in a summary that describes the data sample and its measurements.<sup>4</sup> Descriptive statistical analysis is often used in social sciences, healthcare, and business research, among other fields. It is a useful tool for presenting and interpreting data in a meaningful way, allowing researchers to make informed conclusions and decisions based on the available evidence.<sup>5</sup> With the help of literature review, we used these two; database design theory and descriptive statistical analysis, for designing the digital database as a website, which made the data readily available and

<sup>3</sup> Erwin Panofsky, “1955,” “, 1955.

<sup>4</sup> M G Kendall Stuart and A., “The Advanced Theory of Statistics” 2 (1977).

<sup>5</sup> Stuart and A.

easy to understand for the users.

	<b>Pre-Iconography (Generics)</b>	<b>Iconography (Specifics)</b>	<b>Iconology (Interpretation)</b>	
Person or Thing	Individual name of mythical creature	Type of specified mythical creature	Classified as belonging to which category of mythical being (see list)	
Action or State	Notice of events or pattern of events	Specific Action/ behavior as observed/ Told by the Locals	Emotions and archetype identified by actions	
Place	Province/ Region	City/Area, Terrain, Climate, (Element /Attribute)	Clothing, Armour, Accessories, Area, Specific Symbols/ Patterns, tattoos, Elements of Nature	Character Variation <b>B</b>
Time	Era/ Year of Origin	Cultural Background, season, time of Day	Attire, Aging, Impact of Experiences, Transformation over the years,	
Visual Elements	Shape/ Line, Silhouette, Proportion/ Exaggeration, Expression, Pose/Stance, Scale, Color			Character Variation <b>C</b>
			Character Variation <b>A</b>	

Figure 2. Adapted Version of Panofsky-Shatford Facet Matrix

Mythology comprises stories, beliefs, and cultural practices explaining natural phenomena and social norms, reinforcing cultural identity and continuity. Key theories include Rational, Functional, Structural, and Psychological myths, each addressing aspects of human nature and societal control. Concepts of traditional beliefs passed through generations, narratives and cultural symbols make up for folklore.<sup>6</sup> Mirroring varied but similar values forming cultural identity is largely represented and differs from mythology which is based on supernatural narratives. Ancient civilizations such as Indus Valley and Vedic cultures are home to the roots of mythology and folklore. Regardless of their importance, phenomenon of globalization have hindered their traditions to continue for which reason digital preservation is employed to counter that. Elements and characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, race, genre, historical aspects and geography can categorize Pakistani folklore which make up the country's varied cultural legacy and heritage.

Folklore and mythology play an essential role in becoming a conduit between the past and the present and provide moral lessons in order to inspire literature, art and music. Phenomenon of colonialism and modernization have sabotaged their significance which has prompted endeavours for their preservation and revival. In order to preserve and safeguard the cultural identity this research aims to impress the need for its documentation.<sup>7</sup> Pakistan's folklore and mythology have molded them through Colonialism and modernization. Original stories and narratives have been compromised by social media for commercial gain. Indigenous anecdotes and stories have been overwhelmed by the Western media, but it should be noted that digital media has also paved ways for modern cultural

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall, Sean Nixon, and Jessica Evans, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (SAGE Publications Limited, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Abbas, "Folklore and Mythology of Pakistan: An Overview."

elements through storytelling.

Islamic beliefs and pre Islamic trends and traditions generated from Hinduism and Buddhism make up for Pakistani folklore. For examples incidents and stories like that of Yusuf and Zulaikha provide moral lessons. Mirroring a combination of spiritual and cultural identity, myths of gods and mythical creatures explain natural phenomenon. Digital preservation has upgraded accessibility against globalization even through oral traditions have preserved Pakistani folklore. It has been urged to use digital platforms to keep folklore alive and foster creative expression.

Mythology and folklore unite diverse communities, shaping national narratives. According to Stuart Hall<sup>8</sup> and Benedict Anderson<sup>9</sup>, they create a shared sense of belonging, challenge power structures, and promote marginalized voices, such as through Sufi traditions in Pakistan.

An essential aspect of preserving folklore is maintaining accurate imagery which plays a significant role in contributing to preserving cultural identity, challenging stereotypes, and maintaining fraternity between cultures. Stuart Hall and Edward Said<sup>10</sup> are scholars who highlight representation as an influential tool for forming perceptions and cultural comprehension.

Through works such as *Pakistaniyat Mythology* by Yasser Jamal, *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* by Fatima Bhutto<sup>11</sup>, and *Sindhi Folk Tales* by Mukhtiar Ali Sadpara, Pakistani literature amalgamates folklore and mythology which enable exploration of cultural themes. Folk heroes, mythical creatures and cultural trends and traditions display the intense influence of folklore in Pakistani literature. In order to maintain and preserving the relevant context accurate archiving is critical. It is to be noted that digitization creates digital formats for preserving cultural heritage for ease in accessibility Proper archiving, file formats, and adaptability to emerging technologies are critical to maintaining relevance and preserving context.<sup>12</sup> The most effective way of illustrating folklore and mythology is through visual imagery. It is critical that these visuals create a balance between cultural relevance and ease in accessibility through tools of color theory, symbolism and composition to narrate a story effectively.<sup>13</sup> The combination of cultural identity and storytelling in folklore can be done by character design. Cultural themes, symbolic traits and traditional aesthetics are combined by designers in order to create characters that connect with audiences in the modern world while preserving their legacy.<sup>14</sup> In order to create a character design that focus on background, personality traits, visual representation and cultural traits as propounded by Panofsky's theory of iconology.<sup>15</sup> Elements of expression, expression, posture, and color are pivotal to transmitting emotions and personality effectively. Interactive avenues can be created by websites that can showcase folklore and mythology, all the while combining usability with aesthetic values to share cultural elements.<sup>16</sup> The importance of preserving cultural legacy and heritage through modern

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<sup>8</sup> Hall, Nixon, and Evans, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict Anderson, "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism," in *The New Social Theory Reader* (Routledge, 2020), 282–88.

<sup>10</sup> Edward W Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered," in *Postcolonial Criticism* (Routledge, 2014), 126–44.

<sup>11</sup> Fatima Bhutto, *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (Penguin Books, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Eileen Kennedy-Moore and Jeanne C Watson, *Expressing Emotion: Myths, Realities, and Therapeutic Strategies* (Guilford Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, "Folk Art and Folklore Illustrations: Cultural Representation in Visual Storytelling."

<sup>14</sup> R Fuchs, *The Art of Character Design: A Guide to Creating Meaningful Characters for Animation, Comics, and Video Games* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Routledge, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Michael W Morris and Dacher Keltner, "How Emotions Work: The Social Functions of Emotional Expression in Negotiations," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 22 (2000): 1–50.



means can be done through visual imagery representing folklore and mythology.<sup>17</sup> The study highlights the potency of integrating traditional cultural preservation with digital accessibility if one is to apply Panofsky's iconology and promote interactive websites.

### 3. Method

Academic papers, books and archives of cultural were studied alongwith gathering relevant visual material, stories and narratives that involved mythology and folklore. The guideline entailed character designing in the paradigm of culture. Factors such as attire, overall appearance, visual parameters and symbols that form a unique culture. A comparison was established through simulation varied scenarios in which characters were to analyze the gathered data with the focus on the culture. This helps in making it possible to focus on common themes, visual materials and motifs with a connection to mythology and folklore. Here, I we chose a certain number of characters from the gathered and sorted data. The chosen number of data then be represented in characters. We also decided on A factor for choosing these characters. Preliminary process included character designing by collecting relevant data that connect to visual factors according to the principles of aesthetics, proportions and silhouette. The design of the character were based on feedback the character design was improved with finesse to make it aesthetically pleasing, authentic to culture and in conjunction with the relevant theme.

The project explored the process of cultural expression through characters. It dealt with the appropriate process and techniques of character design. The viewer would gain easy access to culturally appropriate characters and their stories. The final product was a dynamic website which would serve as an **Online encyclopedia** and a **Wiki Site** where users can comment, converse and submit their own versions of the lores/characters.

For the splash screen animation, we created a hand-drawn, 2D frame-by-frame sequence to introduce the website. The animation features nine mythical creatures positioned around the logo, each entering the frame in a manner reflecting their unique characteristics and movements.

We animated **Buru** the lake monster, crawling up the screen, using slow, deliberate movements to mimic the lizard's natural climbing behavior before it settled in the top-right corner. The **Dragon Nihang** was animated to swim across the screen as if underwater, with fluid, wave-like motions to convey its aquatic nature. The **Mum**, a four-legged beast, was brought in from the left side of the screen, its heavy steps adding weight to its walk, and I gave it a pause to look directly at the viewer with a menacing grin. The deity **Justek** was animated with smooth, graceful movements as she elegantly sat down, her posture exuding poise.

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<sup>17</sup> Joan L G Baart, Esther L Baart-Bremer, and others, *Bibliography of Languages of Northern Pakistan* (National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad, 2001).



Figure 3. Splash Screen

For the **Wind Spirit Gwat**, we used swirling and dissipating motions to simulate a wind-like emergence, giving it a flowing, ethereal quality. The **Churail** was animated pulling herself up from below the screen using her long, spindly arms, with jerky, unsettling movements to enhance her eerie presence. The **Fairy** was designed to rise swiftly from underwater, with her head breaking the surface in one fluid motion, her hair bouncing naturally to add a sense of lightness. The **Chumur Deki** entered from the left with a steady, natural walk cycle, while **Quqnoz**, the giant bird, entered in from the right, its wings flapping in a powerful arc to convey its size and majesty. This animation combined naturalistic motion with the creatures' mythical attributes, creating an engaging introduction to the website while visually grounding each character in its unique identity.

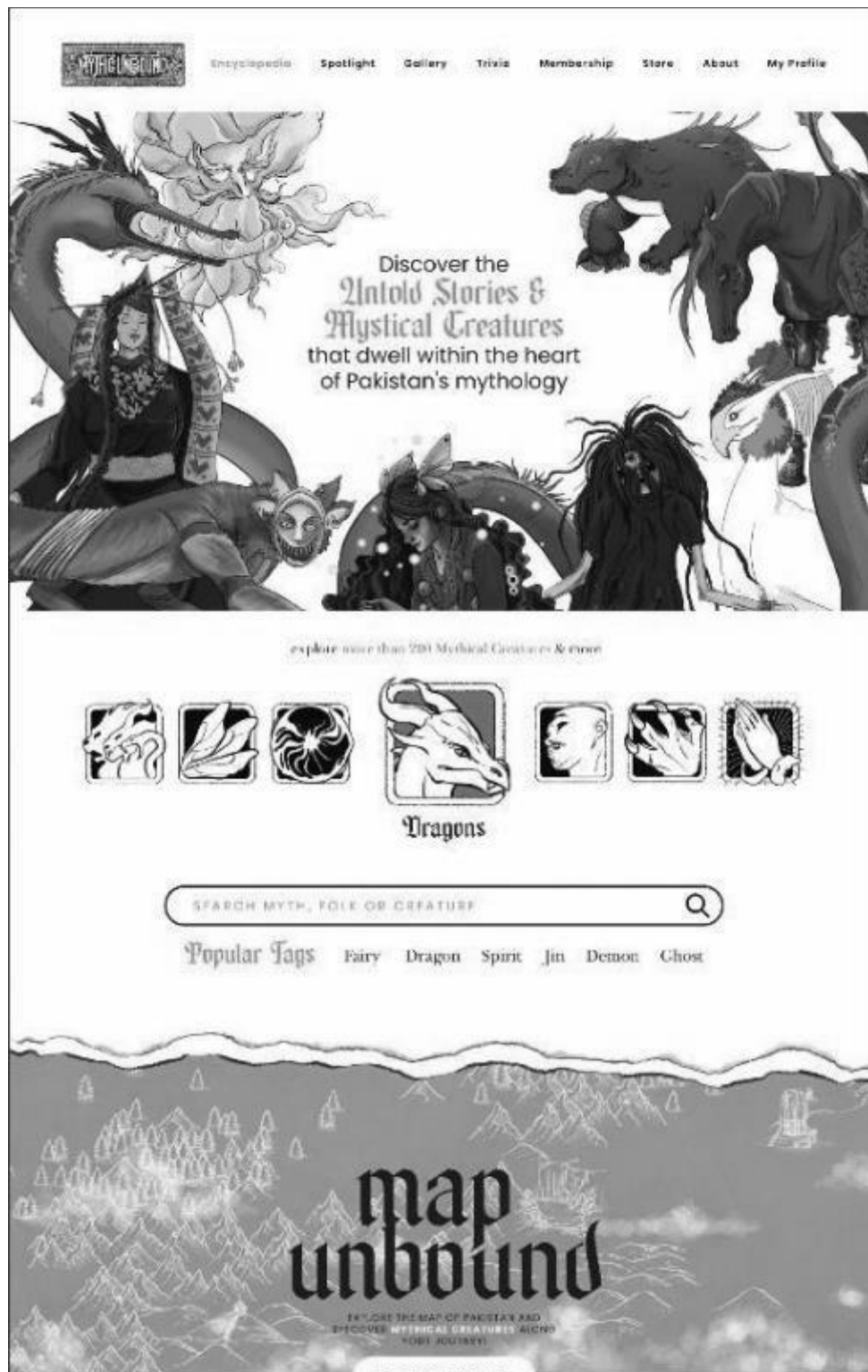


Figure 4. Webpage/ Homepage



#### 4. Conclusion

The research highlighted the fundamental importance of cultural representation in character design as it worked on the mythology and folklore to create an active online website. Culturally authentic characters were generated, using aesthetics, proportions, and silhouettes from found data in an analysis of academic materials, visual materials, and narratives. The iterative design process ensured each cycle of improvement had the right refinements aligned to the proposed character. The final output, an interactive Wiki site, enabled users to explore, contribute, and interact with culturally rooted characters. The hand-drawn 2D splash screen animation highlighted each character's properties and thus further enhanced their appearance stories. The study combined cultural expression with digital interactivity, leading to an even greater appreciation for cultural heritage.

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