

## The Structural Design and Artistic Formation of Folk Riddles

Amar Djadi

amar.djadi@univ-msila.dz

University of M'sila ; Algeria

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### Abstract

Folk literature flows through the lives of individuals in a community, spoken on their tongues, reflected in their behaviors and actions, and plays a vital role in the life of nations and peoples. It expresses their realities and records events, portraying their dreams, customs, and traditions.

Forms of folk expression have varied and multiplied, including poetry, stories, proverbs, folk songs, myths, epics, and riddles. Among these, riddles have long fascinated people; they infused them with their knowledge and culture and turned to them during leisure and social gatherings. It's important to note that riddles have purpose, structure, and objectives, in addition to their remarkable artistic qualities that make them a subject of study for researchers. But what is a riddle? How is it structured? And what are its most notable artistic characteristics?

Keywords: structural design, artistic formation, folk riddle.

### Introduction:

Folk heritage is the culmination of human experiences in life — a summary of what people have achieved through various events and interactions. Every nation has its own oral folklore that commemorates its glories and values, and expresses its spiritual interests and emotional

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sentiments. This heritage represents a vast and rich archive preserving the culture, arts, and history of these nations.

The forms of folk expression are diverse: stories, poetry, proverbs, songs, and riddles. Riddles have particularly captivated people since ancient times, becoming vessels for their knowledge and culture, integrated into their myths and tales, and used in times of entertainment and social gatherings.

The folk riddle is a literary genre in its own right, with artistic, linguistic, and rhetorical foundations. It is one of the oral literary arts in which people have deposited the essence of their thoughts, experiences, and cultural heritage across generations. Riddles encapsulate their feelings, perceptions, and stances on life and society.

Riddles are ancient — as old as humankind — and arose from the natural, daily exercises of primitive humans with the phenomena of nature and life. These phenomena inspired curiosity about the mysteries of certain entities, prompting individuals to express them in creative folk forms such as riddles, which played an important social role, much like rituals.

In Algerian colloquial Arabic, the folk riddle is known as "el-maḥājīyah", and it has garnered great interest. It was widely circulated among the popular classes and was one of the most honest means of expressing real life. It depicted various aspects of the natural environment and human daily life. There are riddles related to people, plants, animals, and nature itself. Despite their simplicity, these riddles showcase popular intelligence and the ability to link outward expression with inner meaning. For many, riddles were the "dessert" of noble, entertaining gatherings.

## 1. The Riddle: Linguistic and Terminological Context

### 1.1 Linguistically:

In Arabic, the verb "alghaza" (الغز) means to make something obscure or to hide its meaning contrary to its appearance. The word also refers to the burrow of the jerboa, which digs multi-entrance paths — entering through one and exiting from another, making it hard to catch. Thus, "alghaz" metaphorically refers to twisted paths or complicated language — words that confuse and amuse the listener.

### 1.2 Terminologically:

A riddle is a literary genre composed in prose or verse, characterized by ambiguity, mystery, and linguistic twists. It is presented in the form of a question about something, mentioning either its remote or apparent traits, or elements metaphorically resembling it — intentionally obscuring the intended meaning through wordplay and complexity.

In both documented and oral Arab heritage, riddles and puzzles have gone by many names depending on time and place, but they share the same intellectual and aesthetic functions. Rhetoricians have stated that "obscurity is the most important trait" of a riddle. Ambiguity and contradiction are essential elements of its craft. Riddles are perhaps the only creative folk form that

inherently requires these features — from myths and tales to legends and epic stories, all often begin with riddling phrases such as:

*"The blind woman sews linen" — referring to a needle.*

This obscurity makes it difficult to pin down the riddle's meaning, leading to varying definitions. Some say a riddle is "a witty question expressed metaphorically, usually with words that aim to challenge the respondent."

The riddle is unique among folk forms in that it consists of three creative elements:

- A. The Presenter/Questioner:

The one who poses the riddle, designed to provoke curiosity and excitement. Their performance and the reactions it elicits are crucial in enhancing the riddle's impact.

- B. The Respondent/Receiver:

The person expected to solve the riddle, who engages in mental competition to assert their intellect and avoid failure. Their role is not only about answering but also about their standing within the social group.

C- The Audience: The group of people between the presenter and the respondent, and they are a primary and important element in creating the intellectual and knowledge-based challenge, a noble rivalry. Without this audience, the respondent would not be embarrassed by failure in answering, which would make the riddle lose its depth and purpose.

## 2- The Structural Composition of the Riddle:

The basic structure of the riddle consists of three elements:

- The Introduction (Opening): This is typically the opening of the riddle, and a common phrase used is "Ḥājītakum" (حاجيتكم), which some people like to extend to "Ḥājītakum wa law kān mā humā mājītukum" (حاجيتكم ولو كان ما هوما ماجيتكم), referring here to two things, usually "the two eyes" or "two men."

- The Question: This is the most important element in the structural composition of the riddle. It is the text of the riddle itself, where the creator's brilliance shines through in the description, imagery, and obscurity of the known and unknown for the listeners.

- The Conclusion (Answer): The answer is a fundamental and necessary principle to complete the artistic and aesthetic space of the riddle. It is through it that the symbols are decoded and the astonishment is removed. The conclusion might appear in two separate phrases like "ḥall kānka fahl" (حل كانك فحل) or "fakkah wa lā nawḍ min ḥadhānā" (فكها ولا نوض من حذاننا), with the aim of provoking and motivating the respondent and, at the same time, stimulating the audience.

From the above, it becomes clear that the question is the core of the riddle, as it relies on elements describing an unknown object, then describing that unknown object, followed by a misleading and deceptive phrase about the same object.

To test this concept, consider this famous riddle:

Ḥājītakum: "Silsila fī silsila fihā khūk fihā būk fihā sulṭān al-mulūk."

Proposed Elements:

- Introduction → Ḥājītakum (which is commonly mentioned).
- Question:
  - The described and unknown object: The chain / the graveyard.
  - The description: "Fihā khūk fihā būk" (brother and father).
  - The misleading phrase: "Fihā sulṭān al-mulūk" (in it is the Sultan of kings).
- Conclusion: It may often be followed by the phrase "ḥall kānka fahl."

### 3- Characteristics and Categories of Folk Riddles:

3.1.- The Composition of the Riddle: Most of the words used in riddles are metaphors, allegories, and figures of speech. This phenomenon is not ordinary in this genre of folk literature, as the human mind can only understand the relationship between a signifier and the signified when it matures and develops. However, these characteristics facilitate the exchange of riddles among people, allowing them to memorize, narrate, and spread them to others.

3.2- The Method of Crafting the Riddle: Some riddles are distinguished by their expansive imagination and strong construction, which indicate the creativity of the creator. Some riddles are simple and direct, like:

- "Min barra marūj / wa min dākhil burooj" (Outside fields, inside towers) → The melon (dallā) → Simple in construction.
- "Dārnā khaḍrā', sukkānuhā 'abid, tataqfil bil-qudra wa tanḥal bil-ḥadīd" (Our house is green, its residents are slaves, it is locked with ability and unlocked with iron) → The melon → Complex in construction.

3.3- Simplicity of the Riddle: Some riddles are simple, where the connection between the described object and the unit denoting it is weak, like:

- "Aḥmar jumr fī al-samā' yatīr" (Red ember in the sky flying) → The lightning.

The simplicity and complexity of each riddle reflect certain traits of the people, as there must be both intelligent and simple people within the community.

It should be noted that folk riddles are divided into two main categories: "meaning-based" and "word-based" riddles.

- The Meaning-Based Riddle: This refers to a description of an object through its inherent qualities. For example, in these two poetic lines of riddles:
  - "Wa dhi khuḍū' rākīḥ sājid / wa dam'uhu min jufniḥ jāri" (And he is submissive, kneeling, with tears flowing from his eye),

- "Mawāṭin al-khamis li-awqāṭihā / Munqaṭi' fi khidmat al-bārī" (A resident of five times for its moments, cut off in service to the Creator),

- The answer: "The pen."

- The Word-Based Riddle: This refers to a description of an object through words containing its name or part of it in a hidden manner, like "'ushbah khadra tawallad al-dam 'aqārī" (Green herb that produces blood) → The answer: Henna.

In general, riddles are either composed in rhyme or verse and contain ambiguity, misdirection, and twisting. They address all worlds, such as human, animal, plant, and others.

### Artistic Formation in Folk Riddles

#### I- Language and Style:

In folk literature, language is the medium through which the creator expresses their experience. It is a collection of sounds used to communicate with others. Those studying folk literature will find that language carries the distinct dialect of each region. Ibn Khaldun defined it as:

*"Know that the language, as understood, is the speaker's expression of their intended meaning, and this expression is a vocal act stemming from the intention to convey speech. It must become a habit fixed in the acting organ, the tongue, which varies in each nation according to its dialects."*

This is what makes the language in folk literature distinct and identifiable by region. In general, folk literature uses a specific language that is neither purely colloquial nor entirely formal, but one that lies in between, emphasizing ease in its construction and exceptional ability to express and create in its various forms and images.

Muhammad Dhahni states, "Thus, folk literature is distinguished by a particular language that is difficult to describe or analyze, but it is certainly not colloquial. It strikes a balance in ease of creation." This means that people tend to adopt a medium language for daily use, which is neither too colloquial nor too foreign to the region.

From the above, we can conclude that the language of folk riddles generally elevates itself above the colloquial language used in daily life and moves closer to the formal language, as seen in the following examples:

- "Baqartinā al-ṣafrā' wulidat fi ḥafrāh" (Our yellow cow was born in a hole) → Fire.
- "Yaghli mā yaṭīb... yukbar mā yashīb... yatthannā mā ya'īb" (Boils but never cooks... grows but never gets old... bends but never breaks) → Water, crow, snake.
- "Yaḥfur bilā fās, wa yaqtul bilā raṣāṣ" (It digs without a pick, and kills without bullets) → Smallpox.

These examples, while not strictly adhering to formal grammar rules, seem close to formal language.

Abdel-Malek Murtād divided the language of folk riddles into two main categories:

- The first is Bedouin language, which is characterized by strength and richness.

Sometimes, it is rarely used in colloquial vocabulary. An example is:

- "Sikīnī jabbadtuh bi-yadī ba'd mā laḥ ḍiāh" (I drew my knife with my hand after its light faded).

This riddle illustrates milk during the milking process from a goat's udder. The riddle is dominated by Bedouin language in terms of vocabulary (sikīnī, jabbadtuh, jiwah) and its content, depicting the rural life focused on herding sheep and using them for practical purposes. Another example is the riddle:

- "Mizwād ṣūf yabāt yashūf" (A wool basket spends the night and sees). The language here is also Bedouin in both its vocabulary (mīzwād ṣūf, yashūf) and its meaning, related to rural life where such items were commonly used.

he "mezoued" (a traditional woven container) is used by the inhabitants of the countryside and desert to store flour and wool, which are materials for traditional garments such as the "burnous"—a cloak that is emblematic of life in the desert.

Secondly, we consider riddles characterized by refined and polite language, echoing the civilization of urban life and the gentleness of its people. Examples include:

- "It walks without legs and cries for no reason" → (*The cloud*)
- "A little girl is born and raised by God's power" → (*The bee*)

These riddles are distinguished by their urban language, noted for its simplicity and elegance, whether in vocabulary or content.

In conclusion, beauty lies in how language is employed. If a creative person uses it well, they can reach into the soul of the audience and achieve their intended goal.

As for style, which refers to the set of linguistic capabilities exploited by the writer aiming to convey meaning in the clearest, most elegant way possible—it is the mental framework that gives shape to expressions and ensures they convey the intended message while aligning with the art of eloquence.

The word "style" (أسلوب) comes from a root meaning "to strip or take away," and in linguistic terms, it refers to a method, path, or genre. One might say: "So-and-so has taken to various styles of speech," meaning forms and modes of expression.

Speech only exists as sentences, and these follow a particular structure. That structure is the material form that reveals the nature and characteristics of the style.

Therefore, the style of folk riddles is distinctive, marked by contrast and variety. Sometimes it uses short sentences, and at other times, long and flowing or rhymed ones. These riddles may contain rhetorical embellishments or be entirely devoid of them.

Folk riddles are crafted on two levels:

1. Syntactic Level:

Folk riddles mostly rely on descriptive (declarative) structures, often used to portray and illustrate. These may appear as affirmative or negative, and be either nominal or verbal sentences. Sometimes, interrogative, imperative, or exclamatory structures are also used.

Examples of affirmative declarative riddles:

- “An old woman in a cave who feeds little ones with pepper” → (*The scorpion*)
- “Palm-sized, yet contains a thousand and one” → (*The pomegranate*)
- “White and fluffy, drinks water like a sheep” → (*Flour*)

Examples mixing affirmation and negation:

- “Dark and crumbly, has neither bone nor feather” → (*Tar*)

An example using conditional construction:

“Abdel-Samad said a word and was right. Witness it, my friend: I saw something from nothing—if I lied, then kill me.”

→ (*The wind*)

(The conditional “if I lied, then kill me” affirms the truth of what is said.)

As for interrogative and exclamatory structures, they are present and varied:

- Imperative example:

“I saw water trapped where blood belongs. If I lied, then kill me.” → (*The water skin*)

- Exclamatory example:

“It glimmers and shimmers... with black eyes that sparkle... swift yet never overtakes.”  
→ (*The Saluki dog*)

2. Phonetic Level:

Phonetic rhythm plays a crucial role in the aesthetic of style. In Arabic, the beauty of style heavily depends on sound rhythm, and indeed, the miraculous nature of the Qur’an lies foremost in its sonic harmony.

The most important source of sound rhythm in folk riddles is rhymed prose (saj’), which substitutes for rhyme and meter in poetry. This stylistic device lends a powerful artistic and emotional impact. For example:

- “A wild pig in a bag, spotted far away... neck like a hook, ears made of iron” → (*The rifle*)
- “Scruffy rabbit... stuck to the door frame... finds the right fit and locks it” → (*The key and padlock*)
- “Its name starts with ‘fa’, you might mistake it for an axe... digs with precision and fears the stick” → (*The mouse*)

In Summary:

Folk riddles use elevated language, close to formal Arabic. They vary between rural and urban tones—strong and robust in the countryside, delicate and refined in the city. They include both declarative and interrogative styles, with rhyme adding beauty and aiding memorization. This indicates that the folk creator possesses a rich imagination, sharp observational skills, and a high level of linguistic creativity and artistic expression.

## 2. Symbolism (الرمز):

Interest in symbolism began with Renaissance philosophers and modern thinkers in Europe, who defined a symbol as “a means of expressing an idea using intermediaries.” It is, in essence, a verbal construction that implies meaning through analogy, transcending literal words to unify emotion and intellect.

The Arabs knew symbolism as early as the Abbasid era, when Shi'ite and Sufi movements inspired symbolic expression in poetry and prose. Critics came to recognize the symbolic nature of metaphor, including simile, metaphor (استعارة), and metonymy (كناية). Over time, symbolism flourished, forming its own literary school with distinctive principles and practitioners.

The folk artist also understood and utilized symbolism in riddles. In these, objects are not defined by their usual names, but point to deeper meanings.

Examples include:

- “The white threshes, the red sweeps... the stream flows, while the sea is dry.”

Solution:

- "The white threshes": symbolizes the teeth grinding food.
- "The red sweeps": symbolizes the tongue moving the food around.
- "The stream flows": symbolizes the stomach processing it.

Another example:

- “The hawks and I, our fifth is a crow... I spoke to him in a land with no dust.”

Solution:

- "The hawks and I": symbolizes a Quran teacher or student.
- "Fifth is a crow": symbolizes the reed pen.
- "We plowed together": symbolizes writing.
- "Land with no dust": symbolizes the writing board.

A particularly artistic riddle using symbolism:

- “Rā' is radiant, Ṣād is dry, Khā' is in between, and Shīn is bleak.”

The riddle references four Arabic letters, each symbolizing one of the four seasons:

- Rā' → Spring: radiant and blooming.
- Ṣād → Summer: hot and dry.
- Khā' → Autumn: temperate.
- Shīn → Winter: cold and harsh.



Many folk riddles are symbolic, proving that the folk poet or riddle-maker possesses a keen sense of creativity, capable of producing meaningful, enjoyable, and profound speech.

### 3. The Image (الصورة):

The image is one of the most essential components of literary work. It is the space where the inner blends with the outer, and reality fuses with imagination—where reality becomes the material and imagination the tool through which reality is reshaped in a way that inspires delight and joy.

As one scholar put it:

*"The image is the instrument, medium, and vital substance through which imagination operates and manifests its activity."*

An image is defined as a verbal rendering that depicts a relationship between two things through language. It is a sensory element that the creator uses, often external to the subject matter, to clarify a purpose and reach the emotions of the audience.

The image has occupied a significant place in folk literature, especially in folk riddles, where popular imagination is highly sensitive and vivid in its visualization. There is a precise harmony between the signifier and the signified, and the folk mind is capable of establishing connections between spoken words and their hidden meanings. As such, folk riddles contain various rhetorical figures that form their images—metaphor, simile, metonymy, and more.

#### 3.1 – Metaphor (الاستعارة):

Metaphor reveals expression in renewed, enriched form, enhancing beauty and delivering vast meaning through few words. It lies at the core of the riddle, enabling perception of both similarity and difference.

Examples of metaphorical riddles include:

"They struck it seven blows, yet no blood spilled.

They laid it down saying it died, but when lifted, it said 'yes'."

At first glance, it seems a person has been stabbed seven times but didn't bleed, and after being declared dead, speaks again. There's ambiguity here—but the described subject is likely not human, but an inanimate object. The "seven blows" are seven holes from which musical sounds emerge that bring joy to the listener.

The answer: a musical instrument – the "ney" (reed flute) or "qasba". Here, metaphor transformed the riddle into a captivating image.

Another metaphorical riddle:

"It digs without a pickaxe, and kills without bullets."

What is this being that kills without a weapon? The metaphor adds mystery and intrigue. The traits of "digging" and "killing" are human, but here they describe smallpox, a disease that "digs" into the body and leads to death.

Another example:

"I came to wrestle it, but it wrestled me."

At first, it seems to describe a wrestling match between two people, but metaphor plays its role again. The "wrestler," attributed with a human trait, is actually sleep, which often overcomes us even when we try to resist it.

### 3.2 – Simile (التشبيه):

Simile is "to declare that one thing shares a quality with another, using a comparative tool such as 'like' (كي) or 'as if' (كأن)."

The folk artist, with natural instinct, understood the aesthetic power of simile, using it to enhance the beauty of images in folk riddles.

Examples include:

"Round like bread, and its skin is like that of a goat."

The answer: the frame drum (الدف).

The object is round (like bread) and covered in skin (like that of a goat).

The simile marker here is "كي" (like).

Another example:

"Its back is a stick, its belly is leather—it resembles a hedgehog."

Answer: the carding comb (القرداش).

It has spikes like a hedgehog's quills, and is used to soften wool. The simile marker is "يشبه" (resembles).

And:

"White and fluffy, drinks water like a sheep."

Answer: flour.

This simile contains all four elements of classical simile:

- Subject: flour
- Object of comparison: sheep
- Common trait: both are white and absorb water
- Marker: "كي" (like)

Similes in these riddles reflect the rich imagination of the folk creator and their ability to represent meanings vividly and expressively.

### 3.3 – Metonymy (الكناية):

Metonymy is a rhetorical technique that enhances style, adding grace, beauty, and expressive subtlety, elevating the language to the highest levels of eloquence. Folk riddles also contain various forms of metonymy. Examples include:

"Its name contains 'hā', but don't say it's a sound."

"We herded the goats, and milked the pen."

Interpretation:

"We herded the goats, and milked the pen" is a metonymy for bees, which are driven out from the hive to collect nectar and then return to produce honey, which is "milked."

Another metonymy:

"A green herb that gives birth to red blood."

Answer: Henna – a cosmetic herb, commonly used in rural areas for adornment. The phrase "gives birth to red blood" alludes to the reddish dye henna leaves on the skin.

And this riddle:

"What are the two tall ones that became near?"

What are the two that became three?

What is the group that scattered?"

- "The two tall ones that became near" → Metonymy for the eyes, which can no longer see far, possibly symbolizing blindness or poor vision.

"And the two that became three":

This is a metonymy for the two legs, which have become incapable of walking on their own, and so they now rely on a third leg—which is the cane.

"And the group that scattered":

This is a metonymy for the loss of teeth, as they fall out and no longer remain together.

In Conclusion:

The folk riddle is distinguished by its elevated language and elegant style, combining a powerful, eloquent Bedouin dialect with the refined and polite expressions of urban speech.

The folk imagination excelled in crafting vivid imagery through the use of metaphor, with all its beauty and deeper meanings. This led to a fusion between the real world and the imagined one, shaped by the folk creator's life and environment.

All types of figurative language—metaphor, simile, and metonymy—helped folk riddles to spread widely among people, who shared them, preserved them, and passed them down through generations.

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