THE PROPPIAN APPROACH: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN TALE ANALYSIS

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1.0 Introduction

The question of devising adequate criteria for the classification of tales is an ostensibly simple but largely uninvestigated theoretical problem. In any academic discipline, classification constitutes a fundamental procedure. The biological scientist, for example, confronted by a staggering miscellany of species, endeavours to impose order on his object of study. An essential feature of his modus operandi involves lumping together several organisms, on the basis of their similarities. Having identified such prevalent affinities, he then invokes his nomenclatural baggage, to arrive at such formal, scientific labels as diptera, lepidoptera, and odonata, to distinguish one genus of insects, for example, from another.

In tale scholarship the necessity of establishing appropriate units for the description and analysis of oral literature has long been recognised. Adherents of the historico-geographical school adopted such units as the motif and tale type. Anti Aarne, one of the founders of this school, published the international index of tale types in 1910, while between 1955 and 1958, Stith Thompson published his monumental *Motif Index of Folk Literature*.

But as anyone who works with oral narratives will readily recognise, problems and pitfalls abound in the area of classification. By advancing some methodological proposals for the study of tales, we here attempt to provide answers to a number of important questions: Are the present narrative units for tale analysis adequate? Can they be redefined and placed on a new path, in an altogether satisfactory manner? How can this critical problem in genology - that of establishing clear and precise units, terms, concepts and categories - be tackled effectively?

The route we shall travel in this paper is a somewhat conventional one, mapped out, or consisting of identifying a problem, examining existing, albeit unsatisfactory, attempts to solve it, then positing the possibility of a more appropriate solution. The projected contribution of this paper lies squarely in the last-mentioned domain. Thus, whether in questioning the validity of the existing units for analysis, or proposing another approach, we make no pretensions to any totally new discoveries. Instead, a creative application is envisioned of some ideas borrowed from structuralism. The adaptation of such

structural concepts provides us with a basis here for making certain theoretical observations which potentially have implications for African tale analysis.

1.1 The old: examining existing narrative units

We begin by examining the narrative units currently in use such as the theme and motif, and the criteria underlying these entities. While for his purpose the diffusionist- or archivist-scholar may find the motif adequate, its unsuitability as a tool for literary analysis is sufficiently borne out by Stith Thompson's numerous but plainly imprecise definitions. Thompson (1946: 415) defines the motif as „the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition", adding that the motif may be a character, an object, or an incident. This patently indeterminate and thus unreliable definition is repeated substantially by Thompson (1950: 753), and in even hazier terms by Thompson (1955: 7) who speaks of „certain items ... the stuff out of which tales are made". Thompson gives no indication what these items are, let alone embark on the even knottier task of attempting a definition of them.

Thompson's recurrent attempts to define the motif clearly culminate in a cul-de-sac. A tale cannot be considered simply as a bundle or concatenation of motifs. Even if Thompson were suggesting that it is, the question still arises as to with what exactitude different scholars can fix the number of motifs in any tale. Going by Thompson's definitions which are as imprecise as they are inconsistent, it becomes clear that three different scholars, for example, cannot discover the same number of motifs in any given tale. Rather, each will apply and, be guided by, his own subjectively determined set of criteria, a situation that necessarily gives their analyses a great imprint of imprecision. Weisstein's (1973: 147) comments further underscore the fluidity of such concepts: „From the comparatist's point of view, ... themes are the ideal objects of study, whereas motifs, due to their *endless ramifications and interlacings*, are much more difficult to trace" [emphasis mine]. That scholars have been hard put to it offering a precise definition of the motif and theme, for instance, provides sufficient evidence for the inadequacy of such concepts and, more importantly, the necessity of devising new ones aimed at bringing to tale analysis a significant measure of precision.

To focus more specifically on African oral literature, even a cursory examination of published material on the tale reveals the preponderance of such equally imprecise and unsuitable labels as the following: „tales on the theme of greed", „tales of Tortoise and other fabulous creatures", „supernatural tales", „moral tales", „tortoise tales", „stories about people",

human tales", "tales about women", "aetiological tales", "stories about spinsters", and "animal tales" (see, for example, "Book Reviews", *Research in African Literatures* 16 (2), 1985: 384ff.).

This rather confused and confusing classification of tales according to characters or motifs, elements so obviously arbitrarily chosen, not only disregards even basic commonsensical principles of division, but also demonstrates the generally unsatisfactory level of contemporary African tale analysis. Such a chaotic and amorphous melange of classificatory terms, it must be said, raises an unlimited number of equally disturbing questions. Let us take "animal tales", for example. What proper or categorical definition may be put forward for such a group of tales: is it one that deals exclusively with animal characters? Surely, the fictional universe is one in which men, women, animals, spirits, ogres and monsters live cheek by jowl, sharing common linguistic, physical-cum-socio-cultural traits. How exclusively "animal" is a tale which, when represented on a syntagmatic scale, for example, cannot even be guaranteed to reveal any dominance by the supposedly major animal character in all the segments of the tale? Let us suppose, too, that in one and the same tale, the animal, human and spirit characters play comparably significant roles in the unfolding of the action, would we contemplate such a cumbersome categorisation as "animal-spirit-human" tale?. The questions can be multiplied.

The especial inappropriateness of the term "animal tales" is most glaring in African oral narrative and merits some discussion here. Such a category actually seems to lend weight to some early negative assumptions regarding the supposedly primitive African. Although the use of animal characters is not peculiar to African narrative traditions, as Chaucer's tales and those created some 2,500 years ago by the Greek slave Aesop show, it induced further speculation about the real humanity of the African. Speculation was rife which attributed the supposed predominance of animal tales in Africa to the natives' inability to differentiate between themselves and the beasts. Finnegan (1970: 353) comments that such so-called animal tales "fitted in with certain preconceptions about, say, totemism or the supposed 'childlike mentality' of Africans, and they provided pleasing parallels to the Uncle Remus stories of America which they had ultimately fathered".

2.0 The new: Structuralist ideas and impact

The term "structure" is a firmly established one in a good number of disciplines, including engineering, mathematics, physics, biology, computer and the social sciences. In literature, structuralism has remained a highly

influential mode of analysis. As Dundes (1978) points out, „In the past several decades there is no theoretical trend which has had more impact upon both the humanities and the social sciences than structuralism" (p. 178).

While „structure" conjures up different meanings for different people, any detailed discussion of different structural movements such as Czech structuralism or Russian Formalism, or of the works of various structuralists such as Piaget, Barthes, or Saussure, lies outside the scope of this paper. We point out, however, that in general, structuralism conceives of any cultural phenomenon as an institution, a system, with a self-determining logic or pattern (i.e. structure) of interrelationships. The concept of holism is crucial to all structural analyses; in other words, „there is some degree of common core meaning in the sense that structure typically refers to the whole as opposed to its constituent parts considered individually" (Dundes 1971: 171).

Structuralism has close interconnectedness with, and often borrows from, linguistics. Barthes comments that it is „a mode of analysis of cultural artefacts which originates in the methods of contemporary linguistics" (quoted in Culler 1975: 3). In more specifically literary terms, then, structural analysis contrasts with content analysis. While the latter primarily concerns itself with the component units, structural analysis investigates the whole. More importantly, the method proceeds beyond merely isolating the constituent parts of a tale, to an elucidation of the relationships which obtain among, or govern the units. The rise of the Russian Formalist school marked a shift from an atomistic approach to a holistic, that is, structural approach. The old „content and form" dichotomy was de-emphasised and attention now focused on the order and manner in which the events comprising the tale are constructed or combined, in the words of Scholes, „the formal qualities of the tale, its basic units and the rules governing their combinations" (1974: 67).

2.1 Structuralism à la Propp

By their works, a number of structuralists have made various significant contributions to the field. Examples of such distinguished structuralists include A. Julian Greimas, Sunday Anozie, Claude Bremonde, and Levi-Strauss, to name a few. However, we are here concerned with the work of Vladimir Jacovlevic Propp (1895-1970), the best known exponent of Russian literary Formalism. Although Propp cannot, strictly speaking, be identified as one of the Russian Formalists, the period of his work coincided largely with the latter's. In general, also, structural poetics bears close affinities with Formalism. In the words of Fokkema & Kunne-Ibsch, „The Formalists did ...

devote most of their attention to the formal aspects of literature", investigating „the way in which the various episodes of a story are connected" (1977: 17).

Today, Propp's major formal study of the tale, *Morphology of the Folktale*, occupies a highly influential place in tale scholarship. Propp was hardly the first to investigate tales from a structural/typological perspective, or attempt to differentiate between their constant and variable elements. As early as 1893, Bedier speculated on the constant/variable dichotomy, but arrived at no clear conclusion. A. N. Veselovskij, the Russian folklorist, noted that tale plots consist of units, which he called „motive". But to his credit, Propp embarked on a more comprehensive and systematic investigation of the narrative structure of the Russian tale, than his predecessors ever did. Veselovskij had considered the motif as the tale's indivisible, narrative unit. But Propp viewed the idea of „a most elementary indivisible unit [as] a rather suspect abstraction" (Fokkema & Kunne-Ibsch 1977: 27), arguing that the motif could be broken down into further elements, based on the actions of the tale's dramatis personae.

Enunciating the principle that the dramatis personae are variable, as opposed to their actions, which are stable, Propp considers the latter to be the basic components of the tale. Then he segments the tale into units of narrative action which he calls „functions". The „function" lies at the heart of Propp's analysis and is defined by him thus: „Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action" (1968:21). From his investigation of 100 Russian tales, Propp fixes the number of functions at 31. These functions or units of action, he expresses briefly by such phrases as „parents leave for the forest", „they forbid their children to go out", which in turn may be condensed further and expressed by such nominal labels as „absentation" and „interdiction". Further examples include Lack (Propp's Function VIIIa), Departure (XI), Reconnaissance (IV), Delivery (V) or Recognition (XXVII).

In investigating plot structure, Propp draws heavily upon the grammatical concept of a „complete" sentence, comprising a subject and a predicate. Thus his analysis is essentially a syntagmatic representation of the tale, to account for all its component parts, as well as for the interrelationships which they display. As Selden (1985) points out, „Structuralist narrative theory develops from certain linguistic analogies. Syntax (the rules of sentence construction) is the basic model of narrative rules ... By pursuing this analogy between sentence structure and narrative, Vladimir Propp developed his theory of Russian fairy stories" (p. 57).

Propp's seminal ideas were published in *Morfologiya skazki* (1928), but a thirty-year period elapsed before the appearance of its English translation,

Morphology of the Folktale (MFT), in 1958. While Propp's work did not make any great impact when its English translation first appeared, it gradually came to be seen by scholars in the West as a significant breakthrough in tale scholarship. Jacobs (1959: 195) comments that the work „offered the most important advance in method in the history of folklore before the 1940s", while in the words of Ben-Amos (1977: iv), Propp's book „brought forth the promise of a new era in folklore, the dawn of which we had all awaited". Oinas (1971: 338) comments that the interest provoked in the West by Propp's study had such proportions „that hardly any work in folklore has had since the heyday of Max Müller, with the possible exception of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*".

The publication of an English version provided further impetus for structural studies on both sides of the Atlantic, and beyond. Like most influential publications, Propp's MFT has not failed to attract some adverse criticism. However, much of this is also offset, even by the selfsame critics. It is instructive that some of the adverse criticisms simultaneously give Propp due credit Fischer (1963: 286), while raising some criticisms on Propp's conception of tale structure, concedes that he has been successful „in presenting an effective summary of the general structure of not only the tales in the corpus he set out to analyse but many outside it". Of Levi-Strauss, Nathhorst (1969: 17) points out: „The criticism levelled is in some places sharp, but Levi-Strauss is at the same time careful to point out that it can in no way diminish 'l'immense merite de Propp'."

Propp's towering figure in literary structuralism remains indisputable and his work, a highly significant contribution, particularly for its prominent role in placing tale study on an entirely new track. We here consider Propp's scheme even more important for another reason; it can adequately be adapted to deal with the problem of devising new units and categories in African tale analysis.

3.0 Categorisation: Applying Propp's approach

In tackling this problem, therefore, we draw substantially upon the analytical concepts articulated by Propp (and Alan Dundes, one of the leading members of Propp's „school"). Dundes' study, *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales* (1964), remains, in America, „the most important work directly devoted to the structural analysis of the tale" (Meletinsky 1971: 268). In this, as in his other analyses, Dundes, described as Propp's successor, essentially adopts the latter's syntagmatic scheme. He however effects one terminological change, proposing that in place of Propp's „function", the term

„motifeme" (which he borrowed from Pike), be used. Thus motifemes refer to the concept of functions, and similarly display sequences that entail logical relationships.

For reasons of convenience and verifiability we shall illustrate much of the discussion in this section with tale materials from Okoh (1984), a work based on a corpus of Enuani Igbo tales. (The tales were collected from Delta State in Nigeria, between 1978 and 1981. The translated texts are identified by Arabic numerals in the work, while the tapes are deposited at the National Sound Archives in London). Subjecting the tales to a structural analysis on the Propp/Dundes model revealed the recurrence of certain sequences of motifemes. With the questions posed at the outset in view. it is now necessary to give a brief discussion of the commonest motifemic sequences or patterns, which we, in fact, constitute into distinct structural groups.

3.1.1 Pattern 1: Lack/Lack Liquidated Tales

The first pattern, we simply designate Lack Lack Liquidated. By far the greatest number of Enuani tales open with some form of lack. or state of disequilibrium. Food remains the most important single commodity which is lacked; other prevalent needs relate to children. material possessions, and brides. Pattern 1 tales commonly display a movement through (some or all of) the following segments:

[L]]-[[Att.]]-[[C]]-[[LLi]]-[[Lii]]-[[Att.]]-[[LLii]] ((A))____((Z))

All these functions are, of course. within the continuum $((A))$____$((Z))$ which, by itself, is a linear representation of the entire tale. Propp's functions are from A - W. This pattern of tales is further illustrated by the following excerpt:

Tale 5 (by Okohai)

(i) *Lack:* „ ... since it was a time of famine ..."

(ii) *Attempt:* „Ada went to all the animals. but they refused to help her"

(iii) *Contract:* „ ... then Ada accepted Tortoise's terms, pledging. her unborn baby"

(iv) *Lack Liquidated:* „Tortoise gave Ada yams and meat ... even asked her to call anytime she was hungry"

(v) *Lack:* „Now all the animals sought to marry Anoli, Ada's daughter"

(vi) *Attempt:* „ ... Elephant, Bushcow, Leopard. Python. ... they all came, but Ada refused them all"

(vii) *Fulfilment* (of Contract): „ ... so, Ada made good her promise to Tortoise"

(viii)Lack Liquidated: „Tortoise, even in his old age, succeeded in marrying a very young girl"

Tale 23 (by Obuzome)

(i) *Lack*: „It was during a famine and she was a pregnant woman ..."

(ii) *Attempt*: „She begged Bushbuck, Pig, Duiker ... all the animals *fefefe e* ['without exception'], but none of them agreed to give her a pear" (iii) *Lack Liquidated*: „Tortoise threw her two pears ... then a whole bunch of pears"

(iv) *Lack*: „Several suitors now desired to marry Anoli ... and continually besieged the house"

(v) *Attempt*: „Bushbuck, Bushcow, Pig, Duiker, all went, all were rejected"

(vi) *Lack Liquidated*: „Thus Tortoise married Anoli, the beautiful one"

It is easy to criticise Propp's function VIIIa (Lack) as no function at all (as Nathhorst 1969: 26 has done), since it apparently denotes no action. Strictly speaking, however, a lack can be considered the equivalent of an action, for just as any „physical" action affects another character, so does a lack affect, disturb, even motivate a character. As this example shows, it is indeed the occurrence of a lack that triggers off the entire action of the tales in this structural group. The general pattern of this group of tales involves a move from a state of disequilibrium or lack, to one of equilibrium or liquidation of lack.

3.1.2 Pattern 2: Deprivation/Acquisition Tales

The second group of tales may be similarly linearly represented thus:
[[Dep.]]-[[Enc.]]-{[Am.]]-[[Acq.]]
as the following excerpts show:

Tale 4 (by Okohai)

(i) *Deprivation:* „ ... my tale encounters a little girl who had lost both her parents"

(ii) *Encounter:* „As soon as the orphan girl arrived, they all set to maltreating her"

(iii) *Amelioration:* „ ... her dead father appeared to her in a dream, then gave her an *udala* seed to plant"

(iv) *Acquisition:* „ ... thus, she regained her parents' possessions and was asked to rule one part of the town"

Tale 58 (by Ngo)

(i) *Deprivation:* „... an extremely beautiful girl whose father and mother had died"

(ii) *Encounter:* „The girl's foster parents treated their own daughter very well, but often maltreated the orphan girl"

(iii) *Amelioration:* „In her dream ... her father gave her one *udala* seed and told her to plant it at a particular spot behind the house"

(iv) *Acquisition:* They kept their promise and the girl took all the possession, to live on her own"

Dep/Acquisition tales commonly depict the fortunes of a character caught initially in an apparently helpless situation. But while the odds are stacked heavily against him at the beginning, he attains a position of superiority at the conclusion of the tale. Deprivation, the usual forms of which are the banishment of the hero/or the death of his parents, is the functional equivalent of Lack in Pattern 1 tales, as it also sets in motion the action of the tale, preparing the way for an encounter between the hero-orphan and his adversary who perpetrates one villainous action or another against him. The orphan or underdog is confronted by overwhelming hardships and strives to survive, or prove himself. Sometimes, his adversary imposes a series of „impossible" tasks, which he invariably disposes of by posing even more knotty counter-tasks.

3.1.3 Pattern 3: Interdiction/Violation Consequence Tales

Tales in this structural group characteristically open with interdictions, which are invariably violated. Thus the plot is concerned with the breaking of an earlier injunction and the consequence(s) of such violation. The sequential compositional structure of this group may be represented thus:

[[Int.]]-[[Vio.]]-[[Dis.]]-[[Vio.ii]]-[[Cons.]]

as the following excerpts show:

Tale 83 (by Kanebi)

(i) *Interdiction:* „Before they slept that night, she warned Cock to stop his drinking ...

(ii) *Violation:* „When Cock's friend came and called him, they both went out and drank secretly"

(iii) *Disvovery:* „His wife accused him of drinking ... but Cock cleverly denied it"

(iv) *Violation:* „Cock drank secretly again ... then one night they brought him home senseless“

(v) *Consequence:* „His wife took away the servants, the house ... everything disappeared and the 'palace' turned into a bush again“

(*Aetiological conclusion*) „Because he disobeyed, since then, Cock cries koko - o - ko - o - o, looking for his wife“

Tale 86 (by Nwambuonwo)

(i) *Interdiction:* „The (spirit) woman said to Cock, 'I will marry you, but you must give up your drinking'“

(ii) *Violation:* „ ... that night he crept *wele wele wele wele wele wele* to his friend, Coucal, and then drank seven cupfuls“

(iii) *Discovery:* „...his wife said, 'You have had some drink; I can prove it“

(iv) *Violation:* “ again Cock noticed that his wife was not watching; he crept *wele*, served and drank“

(v) *Discovery:* „But Ekekeleke knew, because she is a 'mammy-water' [mermaid]“

(vi) *Consequence:* „She took all the servants away, and with the house, disappeared ... then Cock became homeless once more“

(*Aetiological conclusion*) „Every morning Cock crows 'Ekekeleke - o - o', even till the present day“

Apart from displaying a comparable motifemic sequence, Tales 83 and 86 incorporate an aetiological conclusion. However, this element is optional, and by no means represents an additional motifeme in the tales.

3.1.4 Pattern 4: Motifemic Sequence of Contract/Breach (of Cont.)/Consequence

The general pattern here is one in which the initial state of equilibrium is in general disturbed. More importantly, the „friendship“ between the characters is terminated, such cessation being provoked by some form of violative, treacherous act. In addition to the termination of any degree of friendship that may have existed between the trickster and his potential dupe, the motifeme Consequence may assume other forms; entailing, for example, a loss of face for the erstwhile overweening trickster, some bodily harm, or even death to him. But by far the commonest form relates to the planning and execution of retaliatory action by the aggrieved party.

(iv) *Violation:* „Cock drank secretly again ... then one night they brought him home senseless"

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Tale 46 (by Mrs Okwudiafo)

(i) *Lack*: „ it [the famine] was so severe that the animals were dying everyday"

(ii) *Contract*: „They decided to kill their mothers for food, as they were very old ..."

(iii) *Fulfilment* (of Cont.): „The animals complied and, one after the other, they killed and ate their mothers"

(iv) *Breach* (of Cont.): „Unknown to the animals, Squirrel had taken his mother up into the sky"

(v) *Discovery* (of Br. of Cont.): „Tortoise continued to spy on Squirrel, until ... one day, he discovered his secret"

(vi) *Consequence*: „They forced her [Squirrel's mother] down and killed her, like they had done to their own mothers"

Tale 50 (by Nduka)

(i) *Lack*: „ ... there was a very terrible famine whistling *fio lo fio lo fio lo* through the streets Ani Idu"

(ii) *Contract*: „All the animals decided to present their mothers to be killed and eaten"

(iii) *Fulfilment* (of Cont.): „One after the other . Leopard. Elephant ... the animals presented their mothers to be eaten"

(iv) *Breach* (of Cont.): „But Squirrel was playing tricks ... he took his mother and hid her in the sky"

(v) *Discovery* (of Br. of Cont.): „As soon as Tortoise discovered Squirrel's secret ... he went and informed the other animals"

(vi) *Consequence:* „ ... the animals forced Squirrel's mother down and killed her"

It is clear that in discussing tales with this structural pattern, we are dealing with the category traditionally designated „trickster tales", another classificatory label as imprecise and unreliable as others we have pointed out. Such tales based on the linear pattern of [[Cont.]]—>[[Br.]]—>[[Cons.]] not only account for a high percentage of the Enuani repertory, they also constitute the most popular. Our two examples both open with Lack, and also feature the medial motifeme Fulfilment, before the Breach (of Cont.). This is not always the case in this pattern. More often than not, the motifeme Fulfilment does not occur at all and the contract. once made, is as good as breached, as the audience know it will certainly be (see, for example, Tales 35 and 54 in Okoh 1984: 57).

3.2 Proppian approach: possible impact

We have in the preceding section applied the structural concepts of Propp (via Dundes at times) to describe the structure of Enuani tales in general and, in particular, to highlight the basic units of the tales. In establishing and describing four structural groups, we have, significantly, included excerpted variants of tales. This is not only to show the plot core, but also to demonstrate that Enuani performers employ essentially the same motifemic combinations in giving form to their tales. In this section we offer an assessment of the relevance to these tales, of Propp's analysis. We have already seen that his 100 tales can be described in terms of a limited number of functions, 31 of them. In our description here of 4 structural groups, 14 functions (not all necessarily Proppian) have been identified: Lack, Attempt, Contract, Lack Liquidated, Fulfilment (of Cont.), Breach (of Cont.), Deprivation, Encounter, Amelioration, Acquisition, Interdiction, Violation (of Int.), Discovery, and Consequence.

Although the morphological features of African tales do not necessarily have to correspond with those of the Russian, or with Propp's findings, an explanation for this „disparity" in number is not far to seek. Functions, it is true, constitute the stable elements of tales, but it is even truer that they display great mobility, from tale to tale. The function Lack, for example, can occur twenty times in a corpus and another, say, Deprivation, once, or not at all. In several different narrative traditions and, as Pentikainen & Apo rightly observe, „identical units may be used in different structural wholes and even in different structural functions" (1978: 48). Similarly, Propp (1984: 41) comments that „different plots can have the same composition".

It is thus understandable that some possible functions in Enuani tales did not occur in any of our featured examples. Such intervening functions include Departure, Pursuit, Escape, Return, Victory, Intervention (see Okoh 1984: 63-64). Propp in fact recognised the great systematicity characteristic of functions, by observing that while all the 31 do not necessarily occur in any one tale, those functions which happen to occur in any tales are always in a fixed sequence. However, it is not particularly important the number of functions we have identified. It is the significance of such basic units - the use to which they can be put, for our purpose - that matters.

We therefore contend that as scholars of African tales, we have as yet no scientific basis for the classification of our raw data - the large number of tales from various African narrative traditions. We can no longer avoid defining our terms, in a clear, precise manner. This theoretical problem and its implications for our field of study must now be addressed. In this regard,

such basic units offer us a useful starting point. In Propp's opinion, „we shall insist that as long as no correct morphological study exists, there can be no correct historical study" (*MFT*, p. 15). Although we are not concerned with the historical aspects of Enuani or African tales, a parallel argument is possible if we relate Propp's comment to our immediate task. Put another way, we argue that until scholars of African tales have precise, logical, explicitly definable units and categories, their analyses cannot hope to attain the kind of perspicuity and intellectual vigour which academic disciplines understandably demand.

If we consider the crucial importance of first establishing valid taxonomical criteria in any scholarly discipline, we must concede that, given the imprecision and confusion that at present seem to be the very trademark of attempts at classification, African tale scholarship cannot but be seen as lagging behind other areas of the study of oral literature and other humanistic disciplines. To maintain the status quo, that is, in applying the present haphazardly determined, and thus unsatisfactory, classificatory scheme is to knowingly and wilfully endorse the complaint which Dundes made, with justification, in 1971, in other words, contribute to „the backward state of African folklore scholarship" (p. 174).

The field of African oral literature is a rapidly advancing one and at this point in time, students and scholars of African tale classification should be „much more interested in `method`. much more concerned to establish a `scientific' basis" (Selden 1985: 6) for their analyses. It is no longer sufficient to base analyses on the Aarne-Thompson motif, or any other element of the tale which is vague or variable. Most critics will doubtless agree with the first Russian Formalists who rightly „considered that human `content' (emotions, ideas. and `reality' in general) possessed no literary significance" (Selden, p. 6). Yet in their literary analyses. scholars of African tales have continued to depend on these selfsame criteria, employing essentially, content, idiosyncratic or intuitive criteria which at best, produce such fluid and clearly undefinable labels as „moral" or „aetiological" tales.

These are clearly subjectively determined categories, as it is doubtful whether any tale is intrinsically, indeed entirely „moral" or „aetiological". Depending on his disposition, the competent narrator can bend or refashion any tale, transforming the concluding segment into a moral or aetiological tool. In fact the unreasonableness and overall inutility of such categories become more evident when we consider that the moral/aetiological element or conclusion constitutes only a negligible aspect of some performances, thus not even qualifying as an integral morphological component of the tale. Dakubu (1990: 54) discountenances claims by such scholars as Nketia (1958: 21),

regarding „the non-essential nature of the aetiological conclusion" and Finnegan (1967: 38) that the moral conclusions „often do not seem to be taken over-seriously as an integral part of the story". But it must be pointed out that in the narrative traditions to which both comments relate, as well as in most others in Africa, such elements are invariably appended as an afterthought, depending on the narrator, rather than constituting „an integral part of the performance in which they occur", as Dakubu observes (p. 55).

We further argue that for scholars in this field, any attempt to devise accurate and satisfactory categories of African tales must have as its bedrock, the aggregate of the tale's structure, as is discoverable in its basic and constant units, the actions or functions. Our examples and analysis in 3.0 amply demonstrate this crucial structural requirement, adequately summarising and, thus, classifying the tales by such terms as „Deprivation/Acquisition tales" or „Lack/Lack Liquidated tales". While representing the two extreme ends of the tale's continuum with the motifemic opposites L. and LL., for example, due cognizance has been taken of all the intervening units of action that form a particular tale. The category „Lack/Lack Liquidated Tales" is therefore derived from the totality of the tale's structural elements, not a single motif-, content-, emotion-based, variable element, arbitrarily extracted from the tale. Thus our approach adequately summarises the tale, for only by grasping the tale's structure can we hope to produce any adequate plot summaries.

In fact, some doubt can be raised regarding most early studies that take for their purview such „animal", „trickster" or „aetiological" tales, categories which are inherently of protean proportions. Such labels, we here reject; scholars using these four, for example, cannot deny that a tale can simultaneously and, with reasonable justification, lay claim to all four categories. For future studies, especially on classification, to be taken more seriously, they need to be based on sound structural principles discoverable in the data, as we have shown, rather than on random impressions or other extraneous criteria. Propp points out that whereas classification „... must itself be the result of certain preliminary study", most researchers „begin with classification, imposing it upon the material from without and not extracting it from the material itself" (1968: 5).

Several more studies are called for, to demonstrate, as we have done, the very characteristics and motifemic sequences of tales from the different cultures being investigated.

The emphasis must lie on applying the stable elements as the building bricks of the tale and thus devising structural groups. Studies representative of a good number of other societies become even more imperative, considering

the heterogeneity of African cultures. As Propp also points out, „The inventory of folklore genres valid for one people cannot be mechanically transferred to the folklore of another people" (1984: 41). More structural groups, or similar ones displaying minor, even radical, sequential or motifemic differences from the Enuani may well be revealed by studies emanating from other cultural milieus. It is the business of the scholar to discover such combinatory patterns or possibilities.

It is even more his business to elucidate the relationships between the tale functions in that culture. As a rule, every function in a tale stands in a certain relationship to another; it may be counteractive, complementary, or causal. In our motifemic combination of Contract/Breach of Contract, for example, the medial and final functions each function as a logical development of the initial one. It would defy every known law of life or *logic* and grossly contradict narrative syntax if, for example, the Consequences of breaking the terms of an agreement were unleashed on the offending party, even before the contractual arrangement is entered into. Propp's work was largely a reaction against the deficiencies of earlier narrative units and categories. For their proponents, such concepts as „motif" and „theme" were intended to represent the tale in a nutshell. But such efforts at a resume are doomed to failure, based as they are, on a single, variable element of the tale. In contrast and, as our description of Enuani tales has shown, Propp's analysis is not only based on the constant elements of the tale (the functions of the dramatis personae), but also takes for its linchpin, a more scientific procedure of segmentation, features that enable us achieve a more workable, effective, summary.

This concern with the constant elements is the single most important feature which recommends Propp's model in our attempt to provide a dependable approach, one based on scientific, rather than intuitional, or other randomly chosen criteria. The great advantage of categorising tales along the lines so far advocated here lies in the greater degree of precision achievable. From this viewpoint, our study or, more specifically, the analytical methods here employed, offer a useful point of departure, which other scholars can explore. This will place analysis in the tale, a genre in which „it is very easy to see that there has been ... almost no analysis" (Dundes 1971: 74), on a new path.

That our approach achieves greater precision can easily be demonstrated. In investigating tales, different traditional analysts cannot be expected to discover the same number of motifs in any given tale, since their sense of the plot is based on so variable a phenomenon as the motif. But instead of such motif hunting or proliferation, every analyst applying the structural method employed here to any tale, is able to identify or extract essentially the same

functions as Departure, Interdiction, Pursuit, Task or Struggle, where they occur. The same can be said about others with which they share a motifemic affinity - Return, Violation, Lack Liquidated, Escape, Task Accomplished and Victory. Thus every analyst can trace all the functions that occur within our continuum A--->Z, then offer some illumination, perhaps culturally different from ours, of the relationships between them.

Our approach, then, is verifiable, can be duplicated, and applied to any culture, if the principles outlined here are adhered to consistently. But although, as Selden (1985: 58) points out that „it is not difficult to see that these functions are present not just in Russian fairy tales, but also in ... and indeed stories in general", we need, as oral literature scholars working specifically in the field of African tales, to discover the compositional principles which underlie the tales of the cultures we investigate. Ascertaining the morphological characteristics of our tales represents the starting point in any analysis. In this regard, Propp provides us with an appropriate summary: „The highest goal of every science is to discover laws" (1984: 68).

4.0 Conclusion

The question has often been raised whether, as a method, structural analysis is anything beyond an academic exercise, that is, as an end by itself. In the words of Okoh (1984):

... structural analysis may be employed to different ends; some scholars attempt to discover possible correlations between the structural patterns in the tales of a given society and the manner in which certain other aspects of the culture are structured ... It may well be that some patterns discoverable in tales provide metaphors for the entire culture (p. 47).

In this study, then, structural analysis has been employed to tackle the problem of the undependentability of the units and categories that obtain at present in African tale study. One aspect of Russian Formalist thinking - the emphasis of form over content as the foundation for the definition of the basic narrative unit - evidently runs through our study. More significantly, we have added to this, the argument that the notion of functions or motifemes can be taken further; to differentiate, and thus classify groups of tales which display an identical motifemic arrangement.

Pressing Propp's model into service, in seeking answers to our initial questions, we have not only produced a morphological description of Enuani tales, but even more importantly, established four structural groups. We

consider this exercise to have eliminated, at least, reduced to a minimum, the fluidity and fuzziness so characteristic of present-day analytical tools used by scholars for the categorisation of African tales. The basic structural premises advocated here for solving the problem of the categorisation of African tales are meant to provide a point of departure for further research in this area.

At the same time, this work lays no claim to being exhaustive. Rather, the analysis is perceived in the nature of a pilot study, intended to generate further discussion from scholars in the field. Hopefully, scholars of African oral literature will make further contributions. There is certainly an urgent need for further studies from several other African societies, adopting the classificatory model here espoused, to culminate in a clear delimitation of different structural groups. Indeed we emphasise the desirability for other literary analysts working in different African tale traditions, of adopting such a scientific-based, structural approach. This is the challenge facing students and scholars of African tale classification

All told, this challenge before them marks the end of the route we have so far travelled in this paper. But it offers the scholars themselves a new route, one which will potentially advance the study of African oral literature. In other words, such contributions from them will curtail considerably the high degree of subjectivity, overlapping and imprecision which at the present time characterise some of the tools and criteria for analysis in our chosen field of study.

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