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18. Narrative choices

This chapter describes the narrative choices of the performers. Performers use an underlying code that stems from the **Fa** divination. I will analyse how the performers use these specific clues to acknowledge specific socio-cultural codes. I will discuss whether these codes tie in with the older corpora from the Fon of Benin and stories from adjacent areas.

18.1. Clues to find the codes

The rudimentary framework is not the only feature that the stories of the corpus have in common. The stories also have an opening formula in Abomey-Calavi and Abomey, and a closing formula in Ayou.¹¹⁶ All stories have two agents. The properties of an agent may emphasize the topic of the story, for example the rooster is small but smart (Ay 6) (see 6.2.). All stories have a central participant who is capable of intervening in the course of the events, thanks to his divine properties or thanks to the diviner, who consults **Sé** the ‘guardian spirit’ through the divination of **Fa**. **Fa** appears as often in the corpus as in the previous corpora. The frequent occurrence is salient, which shows the survey that I gave in chapter 5 (see 5.5.). Each of the 256 **Fa** represents a specific metalinguistic code that refers to gods and events in times past.

Let us reconsider the similar stories of the corpus to find out what elements they have in common and in which way they differ. The similarity concerns the combination of an identical pair of agents, an identical topic and a central participant who has identical features. However, and now I come to the quintessence, the odds are in favour of a distinct storyline and plot for each of the stories. It is obvious that I have to examine the elements of similar stories to gain an insight into the narrative choices that performers made when that they told the stories.¹¹⁷

Let us consider elements and topics that I described (see chapters 5, 6 and 7). All three of the ‘Cat and leopard’-stories have the same topic, which is the taboo of eating one’s children. The topic recurs in the properties of the agents: cats do not eat their children, though leopards love prey and eat all children, at any time and at any place (see also 6.2., 6.4.). The Fon tradition considers the leopard a powerful agent, but also a bad and unreliable one of whom one had better get rid. Let us first look into the two dramatic versions of the ‘Cat and leopard’ stories told in Abomey (A 7) and in Abomey-Calavi (AC 16). The performers remove the leopard from the stories

¹¹⁶ Detailed information on framing is to be found in Babcock (1977).

¹¹⁷ The stories concerned are the three ‘Cat and leopard’ stories (AC 16, A7 and Ay 5), ‘The sadist co-wife’ (AC 2, A 5), and ‘The day to thresh the millet’ (AC 4, A 4).

by forcing her to fall off a big tree. In the Abomey-Calavi edition, the youngest kitten puts on the kettle, burns the leopard alive with the boiling water, and causes her lethal fall from the tree (AC 16). In the version told in Abomey, the youngest kitten pretends to look for lice in his aunt's hair, while he ties the hair to a branch of the tree. This branch breaks due to the heavy weight, and the leopard falls off the tree (A 7).¹¹⁸ The third 'Cat and leopard' story, the comical one from Ayou, has no tree in its plot. The performer of the comic Ayou version adds a comic song (Ay 5; see 7.3.). Each of the three performers coins different ideophones (see 14.6.). Hence, the decoy differs in two out of three stories, and does not occur in the third one. It is obvious that the performers of the three stories improvise and use a personal storyboard (see chapter 19).

Another story from Ayou stages a male leopard (Ay 7). In this story, the central participant is the trickster **Ỳg̀b̀ó** and the leopard and the termites form the pair of agents.¹¹⁹ In this story, **Ỳg̀b̀ó** uses the same ploy as the central participant from the Abomey edition of the 'Cat and leopard'-story (A 7). The youngest kitten is a small animal, a feature that he shares with the trickster. The trickster lures the leopard into a tree with the decoy that he may find a beautiful mate, after the trickster does his hair.¹²⁰ This example shows that performers know the metalinguistic code that the leopard must fall from a huge tree.¹²¹

Let us note that the 'Cat and leopard' stories are no part of previous corpora. It is probable that the performance at each of the three sites relates to the situation in Benin in 1976 (see 2.1.).

The two editions of 'The sadist co-wife' also show similarities and differences (AC 2 and A 5). The topic is identical: the jealousy of the eldest co-wife towards the new co-wife. The agents are two sides of a coin (see 5.4.). The central participant of both stories is a saucepot. However, the central participant of each edition sings a different song, although the speech in both songs is that of a noble person. A second similarity is that the first co-wife tries to break the saucepot against distinct objects. However, the type of objects differs: the Abomey-Calavi edition cites stone objects, while the Abomey edition lists wooden objects with a different function in the household.

Let us finally also consider 'The day to thresh the millet'. Both versions have the same topic and identical agents (AC 4, A 4). However, the central participant is a

¹¹⁸ See 14.6. Style

¹¹⁹ Termites refer to the ancestors.

¹²⁰ The leopard in this story is a male.

¹²¹ The leopard in the corpus has to deal with two different central participants, the youngest kitten and the trickster **Ỳg̀b̀ó**. It is important to note that these two exclude each other: they do not figure in the same story.

different character. In the Abomey-Calavi version, the bride is a boy, and in the Abomey edition, the bride is a girl with one arm (see also 5.5. and 10.2.). A second difference is that the performer in Abomey reports that a libation takes place before the ceremony of threshing the millet (A 4; see 7.5.). Both versions have similar songs.¹²²

When we scan through the stories that have no obvious similarities, we find similar features. Performers stage identical central participants and agents in completely different stories, for example, the central participant **Xɛ** ‘Prickly shrub’, figures in two stories: ‘The hunter and the chief’ and ‘The spirit man and the chief’ (Ay 1, AC 10). **Agbanlin** ‘Antelope girl’, is the central participant in a third ‘The hunter and the chief’ story (A 2). In these three stories, the performers shape the following features and elements in the same mould: the topic, the central participant and the agents. However, the performers combine distinct actions and elements with a different storyline.

The above-cited examples indicate that the performers make also narrative choices to put together the various elements of the agents and their actions, as well as the specific features of the central participant. This means that the performers use referential and meta-lingual clues that emphasize the poetic function (Jakobson 1960: 370ff.).¹²³ The analogous actions in the different stories are a combination of a referential context and a metalinguistic code, which leads to identical clues. The clues are semiotic codes and sub-codes that are part of the rural Fon sociolect; they have an array of meanings from the denotative or literal sense to the connotative or cultural association (Barthes 1966). The performer’s strategy is to select and combine the codes in a way that limits the range of meanings for the audience. It is highly probable that the combinations depend on power relations and violations of religious taboos.

One may conclude that the narrative choices of a performer involve the features of the central participant, as well as the elements that belong to the agents and **Fa**. The process of choosing is an autonomous process. Elements and features are autonomous; they occur in dramatic stories and in comic stories (see 18.1.).¹²⁴

¹²² This is also the case in the similar stories ‘Hunter Little Finger and the chief’ (Ay 1 and AC 10).

¹²³ Jakobson used the word ‘metalingual’, which is synonymous to the word ‘metalinguistic’ that I prefer.

¹²⁴ Jakobson specified the distinction between the referential function and the metalinguistic function. He considered the ‘context’ as the target factor of the referential function, while he saw the ‘code’ as the target factor of the metalinguistic function. In my view, the distinction is helpful to describe narrative choices (Jakobson 1960: 370 ff.).

18.2. Referential and metalinguistic codes in *hwènúxó*

Le Hérisse and Maupoil also discussed the differences that occur in similar stories. Both published stories that show that the agents have identical or rather similar elements and devices to the ones in the corpus. Some of the stories in the Herskovitses' corpus also show analogous features.

Maupoil cites a story about **titigotin**, 'the talkative small bird with grey feathers' who humiliates the huge elephant (Maupoil 1988: 437). This story quite resembles the story in the corpus where the boasting rooster brings down the arrogant elephant who thinks he is invincible (Ay 6). Maupoil notes that the story about the **Dobligodo** has elements that also occur in Yoruba-stories told in the West of Nigeria (Maupoil 1988: 610ff.; AC 18). His descriptions show that identical clues may occur in different plots.

I recorded in Abomey a story about the goat and the lion, in 1976. Sixty-five years earlier, Le Hérisse published a similar story (Le Hérisse 1911: 265ff.; A 6). Here again the agents are similar, but the two stories have a different plot.

Actually, the studies by Guédou and Herskovits also confirmed the lack of a well-elaborated storyline and the confusing divergence of the plots. Herskovits wondered why the storytellers told two distinct versions of a story:

The unhesitating reply was that the gods do not reveal the same things to everyone, and that each narrator was telling 'true history' according to the way the *vodun* have given it to him. In other words, belief in a single correct version does not exist. (...). Nonetheless, since in general outline a knowledge of the cosmogonic myths is widespread, the variants, though differing in the role assigned each protagonist or in the phrasing of the issues involved, are yet so clearly structured that they incorporate the same progressions of incidents, the same actors, and the same final solution. (Herskovits and Herskovits 1970: 18; italics in the original).

Guédou remarked that Fon stories are no complete formulas that one can passively repeat:

Ce sont des créations auxquelles chaque conteur peut ajouter quelque chose s'il le juge conforme à l'esprit de la parole. Ce sont des matériaux disponibles que chaque génération adapte à son temps, à ses réalités et à ses aspirations. Ils sont perméables. (Guédou 1985: 449).

There are many examples of details that the performers arbitrarily insert in stories. Details reflect passionate emotions that vary from jealousy to greed. Indeed, previous corpora show many elements and details that are similar to the ones in the corpus.

18.3. Referential and metalinguistic codes in West Africa

Several publications confirm the number of variations that are similar to the variations that I found in the corpus. I cited Herskovits and Guédou, but there are also examples that go far beyond the borders of the present-day Fongbe territory. Goody discussed myths and their relation to other aspects of social life. In his analysis of the Bagre of the Lo Dagaa of northern Ghana, he emphasized that each story has several versions and that variation is the rule in these ritual stories (Goody 2010: 99). Goody also confirmed the temporarily change from a god into an animal or a human being (Goody 2010: 88).

Goody is not the only author who discussed the variations of features and elements in West African mythology. There is more proof to find in several corpora that have been collected west of the present Republic of Benin. Verdier and Konrad showed similar elements to the ones in the corpus in their publications of stories from Togo, told in several languages (Verdier 1973; Konrad 1994).

Elements in Trickster Stories

The publication of stories from Togo by Verdier provides us with a number of interesting similar and recognizable analogous elements. The first example shows that two elements from one story of Verdier's corpus occur in two different trickster stories in the corpus. The first element is that in the House of Rain in the Land of Sky, the huts are made of white beans puree, just like the huts in a Mina story that Verdier cites (Ay 3; Verdier 1973, II: 238). A second element is that in the House of Water in the Marsh, which is the habitat of the ancestors, balls made of **akassa** are a children's toy (Verdier 1973, II: 224ff.).¹²⁵ This reminds us of the children who play a ball game with balls made of **akassa** in the House of Rain in the Land of Sky, which is also the habitat of the ancestors (Ay 3).

A second example shows that elements from trickster stories also occur in dramatic stories. These elements consist of paraphernalia that have magic or spiritual properties. Verdier mentions a trickster story about famine, in which the Chief of the House of Water gives **Yo** a dinner plate and a formula that goes with it. Each time that he pronounces the formula, the plate will supply him with food. However, he must always comply with the following condition: he should always discard the leftovers, after he ate to his fill. All goes well, until the children of **Yo** want to use the plate. When they pronounce the formula for a third time, the plate refuses to supply them with any food. They had failed to throw the leftovers away and to clean

¹²⁵ This is a Kotokoli story, from Sokode, that is in the Northeastern part of Togo, West of the Beninese Djougou, where people speak Dendi.

up the plate. **Yo** returns to the Chief of the House of Water to get support, and thereupon he gets a rope and a rod to punish his children. This fragment reminds us of the magic formula and the devices that helped **Dosu** to escape from his poverty (AC 3). The guardian spirit **Sé** gives **Dosu** a goat and a formula that will provide him with wealth. This formula is identical to the one in the story cited by Verdier, granted that the performer replaced the word 'plate' with the word 'goat'. **Dosu** inadvertently tells the secret formula to the owner of a restaurant who steals his wealth. The robbery happens once more, this time the object is a wooden statuette. However, the third time the guardian spirit gives **Dosu** a fish basket, and a rope and a rod to punish the culprits. It is salient that similar elements occur in a dramatic story and in a comic story. On the other hand, both stories have an identical topic: famine. Both stories show how the gods are able to solve the problem of shortage.

The Yǎgbó stories and the Yiyi stories in Ewegbe

One can establish many similarities between **Yǎgbó** stories in the corpus and Konrad's publication of comic Ewe stories that stage **Yiyi** as the central participant. Here again, **Yǎgbó** stories share elements with **Yiyi** stories. Konrad published a story about a contest to win the three daughters of the chief. In this story, the lizard that is the cousin of the spider **Yiyi** tries to betray the secret that the trickster cut the chief's tongue. Thereupon the trickster charges him with the crime and cuts the lizard's tongue (Konrad 1994: 149ff.). These elements also occur in two different trickster stories told in Ayou. The first example concerns the story called 'our first story' that tells about the contest of the Great Spirit god who wants to marry off his three daughters to one husband, and organizes a contest. The trickster **Ye** spies upon the king and conceives a trick to enable his stepbrother to win the contest and the world, half of the universe of the Great Spirit (Ay 2). The second example from Ayou is about the grey lizard that loses his tongue, when he is about to betray that the trickster killed a small ferocious animal. The lizard is killed (Ay 8). In both stories, the unfortunate lizard is punished for a crime he did not commit; it cost him his life.

18.4. Conclusions on referential and metalinguistic codes

One may conclude that the practice of putting identical features and elements in different stories occurs far beyond the Fon region in Benin. The publications about older West African corpora show that the performers insert analogous elements in similar stories, but also in different stories. The similarity of an identical topic and agents is a common heritage.

The analysis of the corpus confirms the findings of previous publications on West African storytelling, that there is no ideal version of a story. The authors who analysed corpora of West African stories confirm the absence of a fixed storyline.

From the unanimity of the descriptions, it is evident that the stories told in West Africa have no ideal storyline, but are improvised variations. This confirms the analysis that the heart of the performance of Fongbe storytelling is an improvisation that the performer shapes on the devices of the **Fa** divination.

Conclusively, the stories are subject to considerable variation, but the codes that are used, are identical. It is very plausible that performers use metalinguistic codes.

In the performers' opinion similar **hwènùxó** are identical. It is plausible that the performers feel that the occurrence of a number of identical codes that refer to analogous features and elements define the story as identical.

