



Ruth Finnegan

## Oral Literature in Africa

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## 12. Prose Narratives

### I. Problems and Theories

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## 12. Prose Narratives

### I. Problems and Theories

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*Introductory. Evolutionist interpretations. Historical-geographical school. Classification and typologies. Structural-functional approach. Conclusion.*

The existence of stories in Africa is well known. One of the first things students of African oral literature or of comparative literature generally discover about Africa is the great number of so-called 'folktales.' They will hear above all of the many animal tales that so vividly and humorously portray the tricks of the spider, the little hare, or the antelope, or exhibit the discomfiture of the heavy and powerful members of the animal world through the wiles of their tiny adversaries. Less well known, but still familiar, are the many African tales set in the human world, about, say, the trials of a young man wooing a wife, the self-sacrifice of two friends for each other, or the triumph of the youngest, despised member of a family; and the famous 'myths' of the various African peoples about such subjects as the origin of death, of mankind, or of authority.

In fact, all this is if anything *too* well known. So much has been published of and about this one literary form that its relative importance in the general field of African oral literature has been radically misjudged. Far from being 'the great form' in African literature, as even the author of a recent and well-informed work on Africa has asserted (Bohannon 1966: 137), tales and other prose narratives in fact generally appear to be markedly less important than the majority of poetic forms, in terms of complexity, of the relatively lesser specialism of their composers, and of the assessment of the people themselves. This, however, is seldom recognized. Owing to a series of secondary characteristics like the greater ease with which prose can be recorded and the way the nature of the tales (particularly those about animals) seemed to fit certain preconceptions about African mentality, these

stories have been published in large numbers and have caught the public eye to the almost total exclusion of the often more intrinsically interesting poetry.

So much, indeed, has been published in this field that it would be easy to write not a chapter but a book surveying the present state of knowledge of this form of African literature. But to include too lengthy a description here of this single form of verbal art would inevitably present an unbalanced picture of African literature. These two chapters therefore will give only a brief summary of what is known about African prose narratives and the problems of analysis, and will concentrate on pointing to gaps in our knowledge rather than repeating what is already known.<sup>1</sup>

Because so much has been written and published over many years, this field of study has been particularly subject to the vicissitudes of anthropological theories and has reflected only too faithfully the rise and fall of fashions in interpretations of African (and 'primitive') cultures. As a result there are considerably more misconceptions and misunderstandings to clear away in the case of African prose than with poetry. Indeed, when one considers the vast amount published it is surprising how poor much of it is. Poor, that is, in the sense that so much is based on unquestioned assumptions and so little is said about many topics in which a student of literature would naturally be interested, like, for instance, the art or

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1 Most of the general accounts of African oral literature devote much or most of their space to a consideration of prose narratives, e. g. Herskovits 1961; Bascom 1964 (which includes a most useful list of collections of African stories); Berry 1961; Balandier 1956. Of the large and varied number of general anthologies of African stories, one could mention Seidel 1896; Basset 1903; Cendrars 1921; Meinhof 1921; Frobenius 1921–28 (12 vols.); Radin 1952; Arnott 1962; Whiteley 1964. Special studies of various aspects of African stories include Klipple 1938 and Herskovits 1936 (comparative study of motifs); Mofokeng 1955; Von Sicard 1965; Tegnaeus 1950; Abrahamsson 1951 (studies mainly in the 'Scandinavian' tradition); Werner 1925, 1933 (surveys content of stories, including myths). Of the innumerable collections of stories from single societies or areas, the following are of interest either because of the collection itself or (more often) because of the accompanying discussion: Roger 1828 (Wolof); Theal 1886 (Xhosa); Chatelain 1894 (Kimbundu); Cronise and Ward 1903 (Temne); Jacottet 1908 (Sotho); Junod ii, 1913: 191ff (Thonga); Tremearne 1913 (Hausa); Equilbecq 1913–16 (3 vols.) (West Africa); Smith and Dale ii, 1920, ch. 28 (Ila); Torrend 1921 (Zambia); Travelé 1923 (Bambara); Doke 1927, 1934 (Lamba); Lindblom 1928 (Kamba); Rattray 1930 (Akan); Herskovits 1958 (Fon); Stappers 1962 (Luba); Hulstaert 1965 (Mongu); Mbiti 1966 (Kamba); Finnegan 1967 (Limba); Evans-Pritchard 1967 (Zande). See also the excellent article by Crowley (1967) which, though specifically about the Congo, is of wider relevance. For further references see General Bibliography and the useful analysis of collections plus bibliography in Bascom 1964; many of the recent collections (often very much in popular form) are by no means improvements on earlier collections from the same peoples.

originality of the individual composer, the nature of the audiences reached, the local assessment of the relative worth or seriousness of stories against other forms, or the position of the story-teller himself. So for all these reasons—the ready accessibility of some aspects, the misunderstandings or gaps in other respects—this section, unlike most others in the central part of this book, will tend to be argumentative and critical rather than descriptive and illustrative.

## I

Something has already been said in Chapter 2 about some of the many different approaches to the study of African oral art. These will not all be recapitulated here, but, even at the cost of some repetition, something further must be said about the special case of prose narratives; it is in this field—sometimes regarded as ‘folklore’ *par excellence*—that these various theories have found their most fluent and extreme expression. The end result has too often been to play down or explain away any literary dimension.

One of the most influential of these theories, dating from the nineteenth century but casting a shadow even today, is the type of evolutionist interpretation of human history and society put forward, in various forms, by writers like Morgan, Tylor, or Frazer. Besides their application to the supposed unilinear evolution of institutions such as religion or marriage, these speculative historical generalizations could also be brought to bear on the nature and history of literature. In this field the word ‘folklore’ became popular as a term to describe the supposed customs, beliefs, and culture of both ‘early’ man and his presumed equivalents today: contemporary ‘primitive’ peoples and the modern peasant, i.e. the ‘folk’ among whom could still, supposedly, be found traces of the earlier stages of unilinear human evolution. When apparently similar customs or beliefs could be detected in societies otherwise considered ‘advanced’ (in the opinion of the analyst), then they could be explained as ‘survivals’, remnants of the cruder, barbaric stages of the past. ‘Folklore’ even came to be defined as ‘the study of survivals’, with the implication that its subject-matter (which included ‘folktales’) was basically crude, primitive, ‘early’, and, in many cases, due to old ideas passed on from previous generations. It was thus—to quote Frazer’s words—‘due to the collective action of the multitude and cannot be traced to the individual influence of great men’). (Frazer 1919 i: vii)

The implication of these approaches for the study of oral literature is plain. Any type of oral prose narrative from whatever society could be, and was, referred to as 'folktale' and thus treated as a kind of 'survival' from an earlier and even more primitive state. In this way, the aspect of individual originality and authorship could be played down—or rather, the question of authorship not even raised; for once the word 'folktale' was used, collective tradition could be assumed and no question about individual creation could arise. A further relevant assumption was the still commonly mentioned 'fact' that all 'folktales' (and thus all oral narratives) have been handed down through generations from the remote past, most probably in a word-perfect form. Again, this questionable assumption drew attention away from problems of authorship or of contemporary relevance and variations, and from questions about the actual situations in which these stories are actually told. Moreover, because the tales could be treated as 'survivals', there was felt to be no need to apply to them the normal procedures of literary criticism or to relate them to the contemporary social and literary background, for this, it was assumed, was often alien to the real content of the stories. This approach also lent encouragement to the amateur collection and publication of isolated unrelated snippets of tales and proverbs; for when the whole idea of the subject of 'folklore' was that these 'folktales' were only scraps (survivals), there was no inducement to try to collect them systematically. So it is that, even recently, the journals are full of such articles as 'Four Babongo proverbs', or 'Two riddles and a folktale from the Ping Pong natives', with no attempt to relate the specimens to any background whatsoever or even to have collected anything more than the barest synopsis of the plot.

By now the evolutionist framework from which these approaches sprang has been rejected in professional anthropological circles. Yet in spite of this, these assumptions about oral narratives still linger on. We read, for instance, in a recent collection of Hausa stories of the 'callousness or . . . macabre type of humour' in some stories being 'residues from the past', or how their 'animal and fairy stories are probably as old as the language and perhaps even older' (Johnston 1966: xxxi, xxxix); many similar instances could be cited.

That these attitudes should still be attractive is not altogether surprising. The hidden implications of the term 'folktale' lead one astray at the outset—good reason for giving up this otherwise quite useful word. It is also pleasant enough to be able to concentrate on confident assertions about the great age of certain stories without needing to produce evidence (the bland 'probably' of the statement just quoted is typical here). This whole

approach absolves one from any systematic treatment of the more difficult and interesting problems.

In fact the question of originality in oral literature is by no means a closed one. Contrary to the assumptions of many writers, the likelihood of stories having been handed down from generation to generation in a word-perfect form is in practice very remote. This whole concept, in fact, is much more plausible in the case of *written* than of oral literature. As already remarked in an earlier chapter, one of the main characteristics of oral literature is its verbal flexibility (even more marked, perhaps, with prose than with some types of verse). So that even if the basic plot did, in a given case, turn out really to date back centuries or millennia—and in one sense it is a truism that all stories (written or unwritten) have already been told—this would be only a very minor element in the finished work of art produced in the actual telling. The verbal elaboration, the drama of the performance itself, everything in fact which makes it a truly *aesthetic* product comes from the contemporary teller and his audience and not from the remote past.

In any case, how significant is it if some of the content is old or derivative? Does this tempt us to ignore the literary significance of, say, Shakespeare's *Othello* or Joyce's *Ulysses*? The explaining away in terms of origin of subject-matter has really no more justification for oral than for written literature. To suppose otherwise is to assume that in non-literate cultures people inevitably accept passively the content in the narratives told them and are not tempted to add or embroider or twist—an assumption which, as will be clear already, there is no evidence to support.

## II

Evolutionist approaches, then, with their accompanying assumptions about the nature of oral prose narratives, both drew away attention from significant aspects of oral literature (including its literary value) and at the same time disseminated unfounded ideas about authorship and transmission. The second group of approaches to be discussed here has done no more than focus attention on certain questions to the exclusion of other equally interesting ones. These are the problems treated by the so-called historical-geographical or diffusionist school that originated in Finland but which also has much influence in America and elsewhere.

This school asks questions about the exact historical and geographical origins of a particular story with the idea of tracing its journeys from one area to another. Unlike the evolutionists, these scholars take little interest

in *generalized* questions about origin, or in the relative primitiveness of different categories of tales. They aim to reconstruct the 'entire life history of the tale', working back to the first local forms, hence to the ultimate archetype from which they were all originally derived, in much the same way as literary scholars trace back a series of manuscript traditions to their first original. As an aid to the more effective carrying out of this aim, various classifications have been made to facilitate the recognition of the 'same' tale in many areas so that its biography can more easily be plotted (see particularly Thompson 1961). Various classifications and indexes have been compiled, the best-known being Stith Thompson's monumental *Motif-index of Folk-literature* in which the various 'motifs' of 'folktales' are listed for easy reference and comparison (Thompson 1955).<sup>2</sup>

This general emphasis on questions about the life history of specific tales has been one of the dominating influences in the recent study of oral prose narratives (most often referred to by this school as 'folktales'). Many interesting similarities have been discovered in the plots of stories to be found in Africa and elsewhere—in Europe, in Arabia (notably in the *Arabian Nights*), in India, and, finally, in the New World, where they probably travelled with African slaves. Attempts have also been made, following this approach, to trace the historical and geographical origin of tales found in Africa. Certain plots, it has been concluded, can be reckoned as being indigenous to Africa. An example of this is the famous tale based on the idea of a tug of war in which two large animals (often the hippopotamus and the elephant) are induced by a smaller animal to pull against each other believing that their opponent was really the small weak animal, which had thus tricked them.<sup>3</sup> Another allegedly African motif is that of 'death' from a false message, in which the wrong message is given to mankind so that they have to undergo death instead of living forever (Klipple 1938: 55ff, also Abrahamsson 1951). Other motifs, it has been argued, come from outside Africa. The path of one of these—the 'root motif in which a crocodile is misled into releasing his victim's foot when told it is a root—has

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2 'Motifs' include plots, subject-matter, types of character and action, etc. A fairly wide definition is taken of 'folk literature' to cover folktales, myths, ballads, fables, medieval romances, fabliaux, exempla, local traditions, but not riddles or proverbs. Some African material is included. Similar works primarily concerned with Africa (though conceived on a much smaller scale) include Herskovits 1936; Klipple 1938; Clarke 1958; see also references in Ch. 2, p. 39, also for collections with comparative material along these lines, Lindblom 1928 vols. 1–2 and Von Sicard 1965.

3 K 22 in Thompson's classification (Thompson 1955). A full comparative treatment of this motif using the historical-geographical method is given in Mofokeng 1955.

been traced through India and Europe by various South African writers.<sup>4</sup> Other African motifs have been given a polygenetic origin or still remain to be analysed. In fact, in spite of the general influence of this approach, not many systematic studies of the life history of motifs in African tales have yet been completed. Yet plenty of preliminary material has been collected in that many editors of collections of African stories have said something about comparable motifs in Africa or elsewhere.

The fascination of this approach, however, has sometimes blinded commentators to the significance of other aspects of African prose narratives. There has again been a tendency to play down the significance of the contemporary verbalization and performance of the story as a whole in favour of an attempt to trace back the detailed history of certain elements of its subject-matter. Local artistry, inventiveness, and meaning are minimized, and the concentration focused on external origins.

The unbalanced nature of this approach can be illustrated by a specific example. This is a story taken from the Limba of Sierra Leone. It is quite obvious to any reader that the basic plot is a biblical one; in fact the outline plot was told to the narrator only a few years earlier. It is the tale of Adam and Eve, and even the names of the characters in Limba have remained more or less the same. Yet in its interpretation and telling by a Limba story-teller, the tale has become in almost every sense a truly *Limba* one.

This is the story as told by Karanke Dema, a skilful Limba narrator, in 1964. He opens by asking a friend, as well as myself, to 'reply' to him—that is to lead the audience participation that is so essential a part of the whole process of Limba story-telling.

## Adamu and Ifu

Suri—reply to me. I am going to tell a story, about when the earth came out, how after long we were brought out, we Limba, how after long we came to do work, how we lived. I am going to tell it this evening. You Yenkeni [R. F.], by your grace, you are to reply to me.

You see—Kami Masala (God), he was once up above. In the whole world then there were no people. So Kanu Masala thought; he said, 'I will take people to there.' What he brought out were two human beings—one

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4 See Mofokeng 1955, following up the D.Litt. thesis by S. C. H. Rautenbach 1949 (not seen; reference in Mofokeng 1955). Unfortunately most of this detailed analysis of African material by scholars working at the University of Witwatersrand apparently remains as yet unpublished.



man; one woman. What were their names? The man—he was Adamu. The woman—she was Ifu. (Ifu.)<sup>5</sup> Ifu.

When he had brought them out, they came and lived [here]. They spent two days and nights—but they found nothing to eat. So they went to Kanu Masala then.

‘We have come here to you.’

Kanu asked ‘Any trouble?’

‘No. We—the reason we have come is this: you brought us out, you went and put us on the earth here; but we—hunger! Nothing for us to eat. Will we not die tomorrow?’

Then Kanu said, ‘I will give you food.’ Kanu came down. He came and showed them the trees in fruit. He showed them every tree in fruit for them to eat.

‘This is your food.’ He showed them one—‘Don’t eat this one oh!’ It was like an orange; when it is in fruit it is red. ‘Don’t eat this one oh! This is a prohibited one. You are not to eat it.’

Adamu said ‘All right.’

They lived there for long—they ate from those trees. They did no work. They did nothing except just live there, except that when they were hungry they went and ate.

Then a snake got up there. He came and made love with the woman, Ifu. They travelled far in that love.

Then the snake came near, the *bangkiboro* snake.<sup>6</sup> He came and said to the woman, Ifu,

‘Do you never eat from this tree?’

Ifu said, ‘No. We do not eat it. We were told before that we should not eat it, it is prohibited.’

Then the snake said, ‘Oh you! That tree—eat from it.’ Ifu said, ‘We do not eat it.’

‘Eat it! Would I lie to you? We share in love you and I. Just eat it. There is nothing wrong about it.’

Ifu said, ‘We do not eat it. If we eat it we are doing something wrong.’

The snake said, ‘Not at all. Just eat.’

Ifu said, ‘All right.’

He picked it, he the snake. He went and gave it to Ifu. Ifu said, ‘You eat first.’

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5 Suri, one of the listeners, repeats the name.

6 A very long, red, and spotted fatal snake.

He the snake—he ate. Ifu took it. She ate one. The other one she kept for Adamu.

When Adamu came, she came and gave it to him.

Adamu said, 'I will not eat this oh! We were told before that we should not eat it.'

'Not at all', said Ifu.

'Just eat it. There is nothing wrong about it.' Adamu refused. She implored him there. Adamu took the fruit, he ate the fruit.

Now Kanu Masala—he saw this. He knew. 'Those people have broken the prohibition I gave them.'

When they had eaten it, Adamu—his heart trembled. 'When Kanu Masala comes here tomorrow, this means we have done something wrong.'

When Kanu Masala came down, Adamu was hiding now when he saw Kanu coming. He hid himself. Both of them were by now hiding themselves (seeing Kanu Masala) [another interjection by Suri]. When Kanu arrived he came and called, calling the man.

'Adamu! Adamu!'

Now Adamu was afraid to reply—for he had eaten from the tree. He called him again.

'Adamu! Adamu!'

He was just a bit afraid to reply.

He called Ifu! Ifu!'

Both of them were afraid to reply.

He called Adamu again. Adamu replied. Adamu came. He came and asked him—

'Adamu.'

'Yes?'

'What made you eat from that tree really? I told you you were not to eat it. You took, you ate it just the same. What made you eat it?'

Then Adamu said, 'Ah, my father. It was not me. It was the woman. She came and gave it to me—Ifu. I said, "I do not eat this." She said, "Just eat it." She has brought me into trouble.'

Then Kanu called Ifu.

'Ifu! Ifu!'

Ifu replied, 'Yes?'

'Come here.'

Ifu came near.

He asked her, 'What made you give him from that tree for him to eat?'

Then Ifu said, 'It was not me, my father; it was the serpent who came and gave me from the tree. He said "Eat it. It is food." I refused for long oh! He

said "Just eat it. There is nothing wrong about it." I ate it. What I left I came and gave to Adamu.'

He called the serpent, the *bangkiboro* snake. The *bangkiboro* snake came. When he had come, he asked him.

'What made you give those people from that tree for them to eat?'

The *bangkiboro* snake said, 'I gave it to them, yes; there was nothing wrong about it at all.'

Then Kanu said, 'For you, you have not done well. I told them they were not to eat from this tree. You came and gave it to them. You do not want them to prosper (lit. 'do not like their life'). It looks as if you—you will be parted from them. You will go into the bush once and for all. You will never again come out [to live] among human beings (Limba). When you meet a human, you will be killed. For you have not done well.'

Since the *bangkiboro* snake went off into the bush—if you see a *bangkiboro* snake now with human beings, whenever they see each other, they kill him. That is why they hate each other.

When the *bangkiboro* snake had gone into the bush, then Kanu Masala said,

'Ifu'

'Yes?'

'You, because you were lied to today and agreed to it, and I told you before that you were not to have suffering but you did not agree to this—now you, you will have suffering. You will now stay behind Adamu. All you women now, when you are married to a man, you will live in his power. That is what I say. When you give birth, when you do that, you will have suffering. That is what I say. When you work now, after the man has cleared and hoed, you will weed. The rain will beat on you there. The sun will burn you there—as you think about your husband's sauce.<sup>7</sup> For that is what you chose. That is what you will do.'

Then he said,

'Adamu.'

'Yes?'

'Because you were lied to by the woman and you agreed to it, you will begin to work. You will work now. When you want to get a wife you will have to woo her. Every man will have to give wealth for long to get her. When you have married several [wives] you will look for a house—you must build, you the man. You will have to get a farm for them to go to. That is what I give you. For you refused to live in the good fortune you had.'

If you see now—we Limba we live now to work; the sun burns us; the rain soaks us; ha! we endure that suffering; if you want to get something

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7 The wife has the responsibility of growing or gathering the vegetables for the 'sauce.'

to eat you have to struggle for long—that began from the serpent, the *bangkiboro* snake. If you see that we hate each other, him and us— that is the only reason. Now the *bangkiboro* snake, when he sees a human, says, ‘That man is coming to kill me’; and if you do not strengthen yourself, you the human, he will catch you, biting you. For he was driven out from among us. If you see how we live, we Limba, working— that was where it began.

That is it, it is finished.<sup>8</sup>

To explain in detail how typical a Limba story this now is would involve a lengthy description of the types of content, style, and expression characteristic of the genre of oral literature the Limba call *mboro* (see Finnegan 1967: 49–103). We can only note one or two points here. There is the way in which the relationship between the snake and Eve is assumed to be that of love: as in so many other Limba stories a wife betrays her husband for the sake of her lover and brings disaster both to him and to mankind as a whole. This idea is by no means confined to the Limba, it is true. But the characteristic way in which it is expressed and appreciated and fits with *Limba* literary conventions is so very interesting that it seems dull to spend much time on the question of where the content first came from. The same could be said of other characteristically Limba points in the story: the use of dialogue; the expression of the action through a series of parallel episodes; the way in which, as so often in Limba stories, a character is at first too fearful to emerge from hiding; the stock description of human beings left by Kanu on earth without food and having to go and ask him for help; and, finally, the reference at the end to the present hard fate of the Limba, about which (in certain moods) they are much preoccupied—the way they have to labour long hours in the fields, season after season, in sun or in rain, to produce the rice which is their basic sustenance. All these points, bare as they may seem on the surface, are in fact of profound meaning to the Limba who hear and tell the story, and possess a whole range of connotations and allusions which would be unintelligible to one unacquainted with their culture.

If this point can be made about a story based on a plot introduced as recently as only two years ago, how much more is this likely to be true of plots and motifs which have supposedly spread in the more remote past. Whatever interest the diffusionists’ investigations of origins may have—and they are at least more verifiable than generalized evolutionary theories—it is clear that too great a preoccupation with this can lead, and indeed has led, to

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8 Recorded on tape from the Limba narrator (Karanke Dema) in February 1964, and published (in translation) in Finnegan 1967: 367–70.

a neglect of other equally interesting questions about the present literary and social significance of this genre of oral literature.

### III

Another aspect of the historical-geographical school of 'folklorists' has been the interest in classification. The original motive of this is obvious. Until the various elements in folktales are classified for easy reference, it will not be possible to collect and analyse comparatively the data necessary for tracing the life history of the various plots and motifs in question. Other influences from anthropology and sociology generally have increased this desire for classification, so that those now preoccupied with this are not all necessarily outright adherents of the Scandinavian school.

This approach is excellent up to a point. Every subject needs some general agreement about terminology, not least the study of oral prose narratives. Clarification of the general-terms here can be most helpful, for instance the recent article by Bascom (1965*b*) directed towards a definition of 'myth', 'legend', and 'folktale' as sub-types of the single category 'prose narrative.' Other classifications are more detailed, and include such 'types' as, say, 'dilemma tale', 'aetiological tale', and so on, many of these deriving ultimately from Stith Thompson's categorization.<sup>9</sup> Such typologies have helped to focus our attention on certain facets of prose narratives, to make comparisons and contrasts, and generally to become more aware of the potential differences in structure, content, or outlook in various kinds of stories.

However this can have its dangers. One point is that, in the case of the African material, it may be rather too early to produce helpful typologies of the more detailed kind. This at first sight seems ridiculous when so much has been published in the field of African prose narratives. In fact, however, much of this published material is of questionable quality. Often we are given summaries or synopses of the plot or structure, the texts themselves have frequently been written down by schoolboys or others with little skill in the actual artistry of the genre, and the final versions have often appeared in none too dependable translations with no comment at all on local classifications or attitudes. None of this suggests that classifications based on such data are likely to be very precise or helpful. Too often, indeed, the collections that appear to illustrate particular classifications have

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9 Though he himself was not trying to establish a typology.

themselves been recorded and presented by collectors who have assumed in advance that these categories have universal and 'natural' validity.

One simple example of this is the general category of 'myth.' In most European cultures, it seems natural to assume a distinction between 'myths' (narratives, believed in some sense or other to be true, and concerned with the origins of things or the activities of deities) and 'folktales' or ordinary stories (fictional narratives, taken much less seriously). This rough classification also applies, more or less, to the narratives of certain non-European peoples. But—and this is the point—there are also societies in which this distinction between 'myth' and 'folktale' is not observed. The local people themselves may not recognize this classification but rather, as in the case of several African peoples, regard both as belonging to the same general genre of oral literature. In some of these cases, one may be able to detect *some* such general distinction, even though the people themselves are not conscious of it, even deny it. But in others, even that basis for categorization is lacking,' and it is not possible to find any local or empirical distinction between different groups of narratives. Yet European students often insist that there *must* be some such distinction, and impose their own categories by assuming without question that they can group together all those stories which have any superficial resemblance to what they have been brought up to regard as 'myth.' This sort of naive assumption is not made by the leading scholars in the field; indeed, writers like Thompson and Bascom have specifically warned against it. But many more popular adherents of this approach have been swayed by a combination of this kind of typology, and of their own cultural traditions, so that they do not stop to ask even whether there is any local basis at all for such a distinction from other narratives. There may be—but there just as well may not be. When facile assumptions about classification take the place of actual investigation (about, for instance, such questions as the attitudes of teller and audience to the narration, or the detailed subject-matter of the different 'types' of stories and how they compare), we have reached the point where easy classification should be replaced by more modest research into the facts.

A further point about too much dependence on typologies here is that this under-emphasizes one of the most striking characteristics of much oral literature—its flexible and unfixed quality. This applies particularly in the case of prose. In the actual narration of stories—and the actual narration is what matters in oral literature—there is very often no fixed wording, and the narrator is free to bind together the various episodes, motifs, characters, and forms at his disposal into his own unique creation, suited to the

audience, the occasion, or the whim of the moment. The same point has been well made by Ruth Benedict in the context of American Indian (Zuni) stories when she speaks of the need for more intensive studies:

The usual library-trained comparative student works with standard versions from each locality; in primitive cultures, usually one from a tribe. This version arbitrarily becomes 'the' tribal tale, and is minutely compared with equally arbitrary standard tales from other tribes. But in such a body of mythology as that of Zuni, many different variants coexist, and the different forms these variants take cannot be ascribed to different historical levels, or even in large measure to particular tribal contacts, but are different literary combinations of incidents in different plot sequences. The comparative student may well learn from intensive studies not to point an argument that would be invalidated if half a dozen quite different versions from the same tribe were placed on record (Benedict 1935 i: xiii).

It is true that many collections of African stories give the impression of fixity just because they have been written down and printed. But in fact, in most African cases that have been fully examined, this variability of tales according to the teller and the occasion is one of their most apparent characteristics.<sup>10</sup> There is no one *correct* version or form. What on one occasion looks like, say, a 'dilemma tale' or a moralizing parable (to mention two well-known types) may on another, though otherwise similar in subject-matter, look like an aetiological explanation or just a humorous joke. Form, plot, and character may all equally, therefore, provide only a shifting and impermanent foundation for classification, and any attempt at making typologies on this basis can only result in misconceptions about the nature of the stories as actually told.

Altogether, then, the current interest in classification can give a rather one-sided view of the significance of many prose narratives in Africa. This is particularly true when, as so often, they are based on what turns out to be only superficially analysed material. Largely owing to the past preoccupations of evolutionists, of linguists,<sup>11</sup> of educationalists, and of diffusionists, an amazingly large number of these collections have appeared without any rigorous commentary to elucidate their contemporary and local meaning, being presented as just bare 'texts', often no more than synopses of the outline plots. Detailed studies in depth of the literary and

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10 See e.g. Stappers 1962: 14–15 (Luba); Theal 1886: vii–viii (Xhosa); Finnegan 1967: 28–31 (Limba); Evans-Pritchard 1967: 32ff (Azande); Junod ii 1913: 198ff (Thonga).

11 Who have in the past been naturally more interested in the provision of texts for grammatical and syntactical analysis than in the variations of the spoken versions

social significance of the various stories in any one society are notably lacking. It is time more attention was focused on these aspects, and less on the comparative classification of stories, the tracing of the history of their plots, or the enumeration, however impressive in itself, of the quantities of texts that have so far been collected.

## IV

The approaches discussed so far have mainly been those of recent American and Scandinavian scholarship, or the earlier British approach. The emphasis in more recent British work is very different. If the diffusionist and evolutionist schools concentrated on a few limited elements in their studies of African stories, the recent approach in Britain has been to ignore such stories altogether as an independent field of study. The 'structural-functional' approach of Radcliffe-Brown and others, which has until very recently dominated British social anthropology, is interested in local narratives only in so far as they can be seen to have a clear 'social function.'

Various functions have been stated or assumed. Stories, for instance, are told to educate and socialize children, or, by drawing a moral, to warn people not to break the norms of the society. Other narratives—in this connection always persuasively called 'myths'—are 'charters' which serve to uphold the present structure of society in general, and the position of the rulers in particular. Others again are said to fulfil the function of providing a model through which people can verbalize the relationships and constitution of their society. Throughout, it is the utilitarian aspect of oral narratives that is brought to the fore, and little or nothing is said, even in passing, about verbal or artistic aspects. The prime concern is with the functioning of society, the narrations are assumed to be of no serious interest in themselves.

We owe to this school an awareness of the social significance of certain stories. And we are also rightly reminded of a point overlooked by evolutionist and diffusionist writers: that the stories should be seen as part of their own social context and not just as survivals. But for someone also interested in the stories in themselves, particularly in their literary impact, such an approach in practice offers little further insight.

Obviously a literary critic is interested in social function. But this, paradoxically, is not made much clearer for us by the strict functional interpretations adopted by many recent scholars. In such writings we are seldom told much about, say, how widely known certain 'myths' really are, when they are told, how far (if at all) they differ in tone, context, or telling



from the more 'fictional' tales, how far people themselves regard stories as educative, what opinions are held by the tellers on the relative importance of the utilitarian purpose, the attractiveness of subject-matter, and skill in delivery, etc.

In fact the functionalists stress the utilitarian aspect so much but, when one comes down to it, with so little detailed evidence that one begins to wonder whether their confident assertions about a given narration's function have in fact much evidence behind them. Doubtless certain of these functions of educating, upholding, mirroring, etc., are fulfilled by African stories at times (just as they are, directly or indirectly, by many other types of literature); but what is needed now is further study of the detailed ways in which these functions in some cases are, and in others presumably are not, fulfilled (with an awareness that there may well be other aspects to stories besides the utilitarian one).

On the one hand, then, this functional approach has not been very illuminating for many aspects of African stories.. It can also, on the other, be positively misleading. For one thing it implicitly insinuates the assumption that, to put it crudely, 'primitive peoples' (i.e. Africans) have no idea of the aesthetic, and therefore the only possible explanation of an apparent work of art, like a story, is that it must somehow be *useful*. And, of course, an assumption of this sort usually turns out to be self-verifying when the evidence is collected and analysed according to it. As will be clear from the whole tone of this book, I believe the evidence can be interpreted differently.

Again, the functional approach focuses attention on the stable and stabilizing nature of both the stories and the society in which they occur. This emphasis on the *status quo* has been a common criticism of the 'structure and function' school, and it is obviously particularly unsuited to an analysis of the living and creative art of the story-teller.

Furthermore, the functionalist publications have tended to perpetuate the kind of misconception discussed earlier—the assumption that it is always possible to make a clear-cut distinction between 'myths' and other tales. These writers tend to assume that any story that looks at all as if it could be interpreted as a 'charter' for society can be labelled a 'myth'; the impression is thereby neatly given to the reader that this story is widely known, deeply believed, held different from other stories, and, perhaps, part of some systematic and coherent mythology. In fact, it is possible in a given case that none of this may be true at all; but just by using the little word 'myth' these connotations can be conveyed without being stated—or, therefore, questioned by either reader or writer.

Let me give an example from my own fieldwork to illustrate this point. When I first heard a Limba story about how in the old days Kanu (God) lived with mankind but then withdrew in impatience to the sky, I at first automatically classed this in my mind as a 'myth.' It was easy to see its function (explaining and justifying the present state of things) and, like other 'myths', it was presumably well known and taken seriously. This was, it seemed, the Limba myth which could be treated as the basis of their religious philosophy just as similar 'myths' have been elsewhere. It was only after recording several dozen more Limba stories that I realized that this particular story was no different in style, outlook, or occasion of telling from the clearly 'fictional' and light-hearted narratives about, say, a man wooing a wife or a cat plotting to eat a group of rats. Far from being widely known and believed, I only, in fact, ever heard it told by one man, who was using it as a setting (like other stories) for his own idiosyncratic tricks of style and content; other people did not know it or treat it particularly seriously on the occasions they did hear it. The story still, of course, has its own significance. But it certainly has not the clear-cut separate status that I had wrongly assigned to it before I had a more thorough knowledge of Limba oral literature. One wonders how many of the narratives so easily referred to as 'myths' have in fact been misclassified owing to too superficial an assessment of the data.<sup>12</sup>

The same point could also be made about analyses using a similar approach, though without recourse to the favourite term 'myth.' Take, for instance, Beidelman's interpretations of Kaguru stories as Kaguru representations of social reality, a kind of sociological model of their society through the medium of a story.<sup>13</sup> One tale describes how Rabbit (or Hare) tricks Hyena, and is interpreted, at first sight plausibly, as a Kaguru representation of matrilineal relationships. This may be so—but we are in fact given no solid evidence. As far as *plot* goes, much the same story occurs among other African peoples, so that for this interpretation to stand up we need to be given some discussion about, say, the indigenous and conscious interpretation of the story itself, the Kaguru attitude to this story (and stories in general), the contexts in which it is told, and perhaps some assessment of its relations to the general corpus of Kaguru oral literature. No attempt whatsoever is made to provide this information and it is fairly

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12 See Ch. 13 for some further discussion of the applicability of the term 'myth' to African narratives.

13 Beidelman 1961; also a series of other articles on similar lines by the same author.

clear that Beidelman felt no need to consider these points. Because of the general attractiveness of the neat structural-functional framework (of which this is just one variety) the limitations and naivety of this and similar approaches have been overlooked.

The predominance of this approach in British social anthropology is passing. Scholars are now realizing that, quite apart from the actual mistakes disseminated by this school, a concentration on just social functions and alleged contributions to social structure means treating only one limited aspect of oral narratives. Prose narratives (and oral literature generally) are once again becoming a field of interest in their own right. The influence of the older approach still lingers, however. For many years in Britain it was social anthropologists with this interest who appeared to hold the monopoly in the academic assessment of the role of oral narrative in Africa, and, as so often happens, their views are gaining popular acceptance just as they are becoming less influential in professional circles. It is partly to this influence that we owe the proliferation of collections of stories with the emphasis on bare synopsis or the moralizing element, and on references to, rather than full statements of, the 'myths' and 'legends' which stabilize society.

To end this discussion of the various approaches of the past to the study of oral narratives, there is one general point that can be made. This is, that all these approaches seem to have in common an implicit assumption that oral narratives in Africa (and other non-literate cultures) can be treated in a fundamentally different way from the literature of more familiar peoples. The normal questions asked by literary critics in the case of written literature are brushed to one side in favour of pursuing historical reconstructions or assumptions about utility. No evidence is given that such narratives *are* fundamentally different from literary narratives elsewhere—this is just assumed; and the assumption made to look plausible because it is dealing with the literature of unfamiliar cultures. And yet, amazingly, the crucial way in which such narratives in fact really are different—their *oral* quality—is scarcely taken serious account of at all.

In conclusion, it is clear that many of the earlier approaches to the study of oral narrative in Africa have in fact obscured many points of interest. In addition they have popularized various misconceptions about their nature or role. This has been done to such good effect that unproven or totally false speculations have been taken as truisms. There is still too general an acceptance of such questionable concepts as verbal fixity,

dominating significance of subject-matter, lack of native imagination or inventiveness, handing down narratives unchanged through the generations, or the basically pragmatic role of African stories. It is because of the wide prevalence of such misleading but often implicit theories that this rather destructive chapter has seemed a necessary prelude to any direct discussion of African narratives.