

MORPHOLOGY OF THE IGBO FOLKTALE: ITS ETHNOGRAPHIC,
HISTORIOGRAPHIC AND AESTHETIC IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT: In this work, the author indicates the relevance of analytic models proposed by Vladimir Propp in "Morphology of the Folktales" of the Igbo traditional tales. Showing formerly some methodological criterion of Propp, examine the morphology of Igbo folktales, the presence of ethnographic elements, historiographic and aesthetic, as well as, the efficiency of these models for the study of the oral narrative aspects.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will consider the relevance to the folktale, of the syntagmatic model of structural analysis discussed in Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928)¹. As corollary to this, an attempt will be made to examine the ethnographic, historiographic and aesthetic implications of the recurrence of certain motifemic elements and patterns in analyses based on the model. Essentially, therefore, an attempt will be made here to go beyond the original taxonomic goals of the Proppian model towards an understanding of its potential practical value in ethnohistorical reconstruction and in the study of some aspects of the poetics of the oral narrative art.

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(1) Propp's *Morphology* first appeared in Russian in 1928 under the title, *Morfologija skazki*.

2. THE MAIN FEATURES OF PROPP'S MORPHOLOGY OF THE FOLKTALE

Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* is well-known to comparatist in the field of oral literature across the world. Originally devised for the analysis and classification of the Russian fairy tale, *volsbnaja skazki*, the scheme has been found to apply, in varying degrees, to folktales of the same generic class in many other different cultures. Propp's purpose in constructing the model was to displace the taxonomic scheme of Antti Aarne (in what is widely known today as the Aarne-Thompson Index)² in which tales are classified according to their dramatis personae. In the *Morphology*, Propp focuses attention, not on the dramatis personae but on certain highly stylized and recurrent types of action which regularly occur in fixed (generally predictable) patterns and which are fulfilled by many different kinds of characters in a wide variety of situations and setting. To these recurrent types of action, Propp gives the name "Functions" of the dramatis personae. From his very careful anatomy of 100 Russian tales from the famous Afanas'ev collection³, Propp surmized that the "Functions" of the dramatis personae are not only the basic buiding-blocks of the fairy tale but that they are limited in number. For the Russian fairy tale tradition, he identified 31 functions to each of which he assigned an alphabetical or graphic code, as follows (Propp, 1946:26-65):

1. *Absentation* (β): "One member of the family absents himself from home" (p. 26).
2. *Interdiction* (γ): "An interdiction is addressed to the hero" (pp. 26-27).
3. *Violation* (δ): "The interdiction is violated" (pp. 27-28).
4. *Reconnaissance* (ε): "The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance" (p. 28).
5. *Delivery* (τ): "The villain receives information about his victim" (pp. 28-29).
6. *Trickery* (η): "The villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or his belongings" (pp. 29-30).
7. *Complicity* (θ): "The victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy" (p. 30).

(2) See Aarne (1919) and Thompson (1928).

(3) Afanas'ev, A.N. 1936-40/1957. *Narodnye russkie akazki*. See preface to the second Edition of the *Morphology of the Folktale* (Propp, 1958; ix).

8. *Villainy* (A): "The villain causes harm or injury to a member of the family" (pp. 30-35).
- 8a. *Lack* (a): "One member of the family lacks something or desires to have something" (pp. 35-36).
9. *Mediation, the Connective Incident* (B): "Misfortune or lack is made known: the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go or he is dispatched" (pp. 36-38).
10. *Beginning Counteraction* (C): "The seeker agrees to or decides upon counteraction" (p. 38).
11. *Departure* (↑): "The hero leaves home" (p. 39).
12. *The First Function of the Donor* (D): "The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper" (pp. 39-42).
13. *The Hero's Reaction* (E): "The hero reacts to the actions of the future Donor" (pp. 42-43).
14. *Provision or Receipt of a Magical Agent* (F): "The hero acquires the use of a magical agent" (pp. 43-50).
15. *Spatial Transference between two Kingdoms or Guidance* (G): "The hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the whereabouts of an object of search" (pp. 50-51).
16. *Struggle* (H): "The hero and the villain join in direct combat" (pp. 51-52).
17. *Branding, Marking* (J): "The hero is branded" (p. 52).
18. *Victory* (I): "The villain is defeated" (p. 53).
19. *Misfortune or Lack liquidated* (K): "The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated" (pp. 53-55).
20. *Return* (↓): "The hero returns" (pp. 55-56).
21. *Pursuit, chase* (Pr): "The hero is pursued" (pp. 56-57).
22. *Rescue* (Rs): "Rescue of the hero from pursuit" (pp. 57-59).
23. *Unrecognized arrival* (O): "The hero, unrecognized, arrives home or in another country" (p. 60).
24. *Unfounded claims* (L): "A false hero presents unfounded claims" (p. 60).
25. *Difficult Task* (M): "A difficult task is proposed to the hero" (pp. 66-61).
26. *Solution* (N): "The task is resolved" (p. 62).
27. *Recognition* (Q): "The hero is recognized" (p. 62).
28. *Exposure* (Ex): "The false hero or villain is exposed" (p. 62).
29. *Transfiguration* (T): "The hero is given a new appearance" (pp. 62-63).
30. *Punishment* (U): "The villain is punished" (p. 63).

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31. *Wedding (W)*: "The hero is married and ascends the throne" (pp. 63-64).

Since there are thousands of tales and tale-types in any folktale tradition, it follows that each tale or tale-type in the tradition will be a unique selection and combination of functions from such a limited stock of functions. Thus, while the actual characters, situations and setting presented in two or more tales may differ considerably, the tales themselves may exhibit the same *gestalt* pattern if they contain the same functions in the same order. Propp's examination of such patterns resulted in his formulation of the hypothesis of the fixed progressive sequentiality of the functions of the *dramatis personae*. A tale can begin with any function (e.g.) *Interdiction* or lack); but, in the advancement of its plot, neither this initial function nor any other subsequent function included or omitted can be repeated. Thus, in the series - 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 ... 31 - the same order is always strictly followed in every tale, even if one or two functions are omitted. An antecedent function can never occur after any subsequent one. Thus, we can have the series, 2, 3, 6, 10, 12, 14 or 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 11 but never 2, 1, 6, 4, 2 or any other in which an antecedent function comes after a subsequent one. The only exceptions are tales in two or more *moves* (or parts), in which, for practical purposes, each *move* constitutes a complete morphological unit with its own distinctive internal pattern of functions.

As has been pointed out above, Propp's morphology was essentially intended as a taxonomic scheme. First of all, it distinguished the *volsebnaja skazki* (fairy tale) from other kinds of the Russian folktale. The *volsebnaja skazki* (which is in the same generic class as the Igbo *akuko ifo*) is, in other words, the only kind of the folktale which contains the *functions* of the *dramatis personae*, exhibiting the structural features subsumed under the hypothesis of the fixed linear sequentiality of functions. No other type of the folktale will exhibit similar features. Secondly, within the category of *volsebnaja skazki* tales can be further classified in terms of their distinctively characteristic sequence of functions. Using the alphabetical/graphic codes for the functions, the structure of various tales could, for classificatory purposes, be reduced to simple algebraic formulas, such as the following.

1. ABC ↑DEFGHIJK ↓PrRS°LQExTUV*
2. ABC ↑DEFGMLJNK ↓PrRSQExTUV* (Propp, 1946:104).

The similarities and differences between the two tales thus schematized stand out rather clearly from the above. It is thus possible to arrive at a structural

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classification of a large body of tales by reducing the tales into such simple schemes and placing the schemes side by side for comparison. This taxonomic method has inspired a whole range of other innovative structural classifications such as that proposed for African folktales by Denise Paulme (1972).

The main features of Propp's model are summed up as follows in the *Morphology of the Folktales* (1946:21-23).

Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action...

1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.
2. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.
3. The sequence of functions is always identical.
4. All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure.

Propp's model has been described as *syntagmatic* in contradistinction to another structural model (the *paradigmatic*) associated with the names of Claude Levi-Strauss and other (see Dundes's Introduction to the 2nd Edition of the *Morphology*, p. xi-xii). In the later, the emphasis is on the conceptual framework or paradigm underlying the structure of the tale rather than the linear sequence of its constituent elements. According to Dundes, "The hypothetical paradigmatic matrix is typically one in which polar oppositions such as life/death, male/female are mediated. Levi-Strauss is certainly aware of the distinction between Propp's syntagmatic structure and his paradigmatic structure. In fact, Levi-Strauss's position is essentially that linear sequential structure is but apparent or manifest content, whereas the paradigmatic or schematic structure is the more important latent content. Thus the task of the structural analyst, according to Levi-Strauss, is to see past or through the superficial linear structure to the 'correct' or true underlying paradigmatic pattern of organization" (1968:xii).

3. THE UNIVERSAL APPLICABILITY OF PROPP'S SYNTAGMATIC MODEL

Propp never made any claims regarding the superiority or universal applicability of his syntagmatic model. However, subsequent studies of the folktales of various cultures around the world have attested to the universal, cross-cultural relevance of the scheme. Modifications of various kinds have been proposed to the original model, one of the most notable being Dundes's

replacement of the term "function" which "motifeme" and of "variantes" of the function with "allomotif", by analogy to *morpheme* and *allomorph* in linguistics. But these modifications notwithstanding, the basic framework of the Proppian model has remained intact and has been invoked in support of theories such as the polygenetic (i.e. evolutionist) view that humankind tends to perceive reality in identical, more or less archetypal, terms, hence the universality of the functions (*motifemes*) and the universally-identical narrative patterns which they combine to generate.

The frontiers of relevance of the Proppian model have continued to widen through more recent scholarship. It has been demonstrated in Dundes (1971) and Haring (1972), among others, that African folk-tales are amenable to analysis and classification in terms of the model. In Africa itself, students of African oral literatures have found in the model a fascinating source of topics for project works. Such projects have been carried out at various levels by my students of Igbo oral literature at Ibadan, Nsukka and Lagos. With only a few reservations and queries, these projects have demonstrated clear evidence of the Proppian functions and morphological patterns in the corpus of Igbo *ifo* available to us.

4. THE PROPPIAN MODEL AND THE MORPHOLOGY OF THE IGBO FOLKTALE

Many Igbo *ifo* have been found to begin with ABSENTATIONS and INTERDICTIONS followed by VIOLATIONS and the inevitable strings of consequences: RECONNAISSANCE (usually by an evil spirit), TRICKERY, COMPLICITY and, above all, VILLAINY. VILLAINY usually comes as a punishment for the VIOLATION of parental INTERDICTION. Quite often, a parent or parents ABSENTING themselves from home, for the market, farm or other places, usually far away from home, leave their child or children with a firm INTERDICTION: "Do not step out of the house"; "Do not open the door for any one"; "Do not roast the snail before the cocoyam"; "Do not look into this or that", etc. The INTERDICTION is usually VIOLATED out of greed, curiosity or sheer stupidity, and the consequences is that the hero is exposed to the malevolence of a wicked spirit on RECONNAISSANCE in the village common. Through a combination of TRICKERY and COMPLICITY (or at times through the instrumentality of either in isolation), the hero falls to the VILLAINY of the wicked spirit. VILLAINY usually brings about a LACK of sorts, hence in the Proppian scheme, VILLAINY and LACK are conjoined as variations of the same function (Number 8 and 8a respectively). In the story of "Obaraedo" (analysed

below), the heroine loses her nose and speaks in guttural tones like a spirit after VIOLATING the INTERDICTION of her mother. In other cases, a valuable object is lost, as in the common tale-types in which (a) a hunter loses her deer-wife by revealing the secret of her animal origins, or (b) a woman loses her breadfruit child by revealing the secret of her vegetable origins. The loss of the palm-oil daughter in a similar tale-type, is also due to such recklessness in failing to keep to the terms of an INTERDICTION.

An INTERDICTION may be the consequence of a contract. Igbo *ifo* are full of cases of the making and breaking of friendship contracts. Indeed, many tales about the Tortoise and other animals have to do with this patterns of functions. The VIOLATION of friendship contracts is usually visited by exposure and deprivation: LACK.

LACK is a morphological manifestation of the principle of poetic justice when it occurs at the end of Igbo folktales. It is the principal form of tragedy in the *ifo* tradition. But *ifo* is usually melodramatic, and so LACK tends to lend to further complications towards happier resolutions. Other Proppian functions usually follow: MEDIATION (the LACK is made known) usually through a song of lament or the pathetic song of a bird or other natural object; BEGINNING COUNTERACTION, efforts initiated to liquidate the LACK or MISFORTUNE, beginning with a DEPARTURE (usually to a *dibia* or, in the animal world, to the monitor-lizard, the great diviner of the animal world). The *dibia* then spells out the conditions for helping the seeker (Propp's FIRST FUNCTION OF THE DONOR). In the case of "Omalinze" (analysed below)⁴, when the rich king who has many wives but LACKS a male issue goes to the Arochukwu Oracle to find out why he cannot have a male child, the oracle divines that his problem is due to the fact that his father had expropriated the land and property of certain poor men. These must be restored to the men before the king can have a male child. THE FIRST FUNCTION OF THE DONOR here is a test, the first allomotif of the Proppian scheme. Then follows THE HERO'S REACTION: the king complies with the condition, whereupon he is provided with a MAGICAL AGENT ("the fruits of the *ojukwu Mmuo* palm") which the wives must eat in order to become pregnant. There is a complication here in the subsequent function: PROVISION/RECEIPT OF MAGICAL AGENT. There three allomotifs are at play: (1) the favoured wives receive the magical palmtree directly (Propp's allomotif N° 1), while in the case of the hated wife, "a lizard

(4) See Ugochukwu, et al., 1972: Tale N° 1.

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picks a rotten nut thrown away by the king's most senior wife and carries it to the hated wife" (Propps allomotif 5); in both cases, at any rate, the "agent is eaten" (Propp's allomotif 7). Following the RECEIPT OF THE MAGICAL AGENT, The LACK is LIQUIDATED - although unknown to the king - through the birth of a male child by the hated wife.

"Omalinze" is only one of many Igbo tales which begin with LACK or MISFORTUNE. In this case, the LACK is a personal misfortune - the LACK of a male offspring. But quite often, the LACK is a communal one, commonly manifested in the great famine". In each case, the tale will proceed through the subsequent functions (MEDIATION, BEGINNING COUNTERACTION, FIRST FUNCTION OF THE DONOR, PROVISION/RECEIPT OF MAGICAL AGENT, etc.) to the LIQUIDATION of the LACK or MISFORTUNE. In tales about the world of spirits, other functions come to play, such as SPATIAL TRANSFERENCE BETWEEN TWO KINGDOMS OR GUIDANCE, STRUGGLE, BRANDING or MARKING, and VICTORY, before the LIQUIDATION OF THE LACK. Variants of some of the functions will be found in the analysis of "Obaraedo", below⁵.

As has been pointed out above, some Igbo *ifo* end with VILLAINY or LACK as punishment for VIOLATIONS of parental, contractual or communal INTERDICTIONS. Many others end with the LIQUIDATION OF LACK. Other common conclusions are with TRANSFORMATION, as in "Obaraedo" or WEDDING as in "Omalinze" analyzed below. In the latter, TRANSFORMATION and WEDDING are coalescent. The hated wife is TRANSFORMED (given a new appearance by being washed and dressed up in new and expensive clothes) on the king's orders after her RECOGNITION as the true hero (the true mother of the king's only male child), whereupon the king ascends the upper storey of his house with her and makes her his favourite queen (WEDDING). In many other tales, MARRIAGE or WEDDING is the ultimate result of quests which take the heroes to distant lands and bring them into conflict (STRUGGLE) with various antagonistic forces.

Many other Proppian functions not mentioned above will be found in the Igbo *ifo* analysed below. These include: RETURN (20), PURSUIT (21), RECUE (22), UNRECOGNIZED ARRIVAL (23), UNFOUNDED CLAIMS (24), DIFFICULT TASK (25), SOLUTION (26), RECOGNITION (27), EXPOSURE (28), TRANSFORMATION (29), and PUNISHMENT (30). We find these

(5) See Ugochukwu, et.al., 1972: Tale N° 2.

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functions in the climaxes or as the core motifemes of many common Igbo romances. Quite often, the hero returning from an adventure in the land of spirits where he has gone to wrestle or to obtain a magical object (e.g. the horn of life and death, the drum that produces food, etc.) is PURSUED by a horde of spirits; in the end he is RESCUED often by placing obstacles on the path of his pursuers" (Allomotif Rs⁵), or by changing into objects which make him unrecognizable (Rs³), by hiding himself during his flight (Rs⁴) or by means of rapid transformations into various objects (Rs⁶). There are other tales which comprise DIFFICULT TASK-SOLUTION-WEDDING sequences. A king decrees that the only person who can marry his daughter or inherit his kingdom is the man who can perform a specified difficult task (e.g. tell an endless story, marry a wife with a single maize grain, tell the secret name of the king's daughter, etc). The task is fulfilled by the trickster or a pauper who weds the princess or ascends the throne. Many Igbo *Iduu* romances contain these motifemes.

The student of Igbo oral literature can derive a lot of pleasure spotting these motifemes or functions, especially in their isolation. But the sequence of the functions has not always been found in all projects examined so far to follow the fixed progressive sequentiality suggested by Propp. There are many apparent violations which at times suggest that we may be better off using the paradigmatic models to fully appreciate the antinomies of good and evil, etc. of which the tales are composed. However, there are a number of tales in which the predicted Proppian patterns are almost perfect. The following, for example, are the morphological structures of two such tales, already referred to a number of times above. The first, "Obaraedo", is a one-move tale, while the second, "Omalinze", is a two-move tale.

5. MORPHOLOGY OF TWO IGBO FOLKTALES

5.1 Morphology of tale n° 1 "Obaraedo"

1. INITIAL SITUATION

A certain woman has an only daughter, Obaraedo.

2. ABSENTATION

She sets out for market in a faraway town.

3. INTERDICTION

She gives Obaraedo a yam and a snail and warns her to roast the yam before the snail lest the water from the snail puts out the only fire in the house; she also warns her not to step out of the house to the village square for there is a wicked spirit-witch who frequents the area at the sight of whom people become immediately stricken with leprosy.

4. VIOLATION

Obaraedo greedily roast the snail before the yam; the snail puts out the only fire in the house whereupon she sets out to look for fire and firewood.

5. COMPLICITY

Obaraedo meets the spirit-witch and gives herself away to him by engaging in a verbal duel (exchange of curses with him).

6. VILLAINY/LACK

The spirit-witch casts a spell on Obaraedo. She is immediately stricken with leprosy, loses her nose and begins to speak in a guttural tone like a spirit.

7. MEDIATION, THE CONNECTIVE INCIDENT

On the return of her mother from the market, Obaraedo sings a song of lament in her guttural tone, wherein she makes her misfortune known.

8. BEGINNING COUNTERACTION

Obaraedo's mother gets in touch with her father in order to begin counteraction.

9. DEPARTURE

Obaraedo's father departs to look for help, from where he brings home a celebrated *dibia* (medicinemán).

10. STRUGGLE

The *dibia*, taking Obaraedo with him, goes out to meet the spirit-witch in the village common where he engages him a battle of spells.

11. VICTORY

The spirit-witch is overcome and he dies.

12. MISFORTUNE LIQUIDATED

Obaraedo's nose is restored; she regains her health and normal human voice.

13. RETURN ??

The *dibia* returns to his home with the dead body of the spirit-witch.

14. TRANSFORMATION

Obaraedo and all other children in the community are morally transformed; from that day onward they all obey their parents without question.

15. UNIDENTIFIED ELEMENT

The people of Obaraedo's community then gather together many presents and send them to the *dibia* who saved Obaraedo in appreciation of what he had done for the community as a whole.

5.2 Morphology of tale n^o 2: "Omalinze"

FIRST MOVE

1. INITIAL SITUATION

The king of a certain town has many wives. He hates one of the wives and so builds a house for her near a place of sacrifice outside his compound.

2. LACK/MISFORTUNE

None of the king's several wives can bear him a male child.

3. DEPARTURE

The king goes to Arochukwu, (the seat of the Chukwu Oracle), to find out why he cannot have a male child.

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4. FIRST FUNCTION OF THE DONOR

The Oracle of Chukwu, divining his problem, tells him that he cannot have a male child because his father had expropriated land and property from certain poor men. These must be restored to the men before he can have a son. After this, a *dibia* would be sent to him to prepare a charm called *ofiri* which would enable him obtain what he lacks.

5. HERO'S REACTION

The king complies fully with the decree of the oracle.

6. PROVISION/RECEIPT OF MAGICAL AGENT

The *dibia* from Arochukwu prepares *ofiri* for the king and further directs him to secure and distribute the fruits of *Ojukwu Mmuo* palm among all his wives. This the king does, omitting the hated wife. However, a lizard picks up one rotten nut thrown away by the king's chief wife and carries it to the hated wife who, like the other wives, eats it.

7. MISFORTUNE/LACK LIQUIDATED

On eating the *Ojukwu Mmuo* palmfruits, all the king's wives, including the hated wife, get pregnant. But on the day of delivery, all the favoured wives bear females (who are instantly put to death as ordered by the king) while the hated wife bears the only male.

8. PURSUIT

On seeing the baby boy delivered by the hated wife, the king's servant pushes him and her mother into the river and since the mother has no strength to flee from the danger, the waves carry her away. (N/B: This seems to be an implied form of PURSUIT. The hated wife could have fled with her son if she had the strength and the king's servant would have pursued her in an attempt to kill her and her son).

9. RESCUE

The hated wife and her son are rescued by an old woman preparing breadfruit by the riverbank.

10. UNRECOGNIZED ARRIVAL

The hated wife leaves her son in the care of the old woman and returns quietly to her isolated home in the garbage heap, unrecognized as the mother of the king's only son.

(End of the First Move).

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SECOND MOVE

1. INITIAL SITUATION

The hated wife's child grows up into a strong and handsome lad and is named Omalinze by his forster-mother.

2. LACK

But he soon discovers that he is a royal foundling and desires reunion with his real parents.

3. MEDIATION, THE CONNECTIVE INCIDENT

The king's dog which was present when he was born and cast away recognizes and visits him regularly. On the occasion of such visits, he sings a lament making known the inner desires which torment him.

4. BEGINNING COUNTERACTION

The child's complaint is overheard by a tapper who reports to the king and the king decides to look for him.

5. SPATIAL TRANSFERENCE, GUIDANCE

The king is led to the whereabouts of the object of his search by the tapper: he overhears the boy's lament himself.

6. MISFORTUNE/LACK LIQUIDATED

The king reclaims his only son after imprisoning the servant who reported to him that no male child had been born and richly rewarding the boy's forster-mother.

7. UNIDENTIFIED ELEMENT

The old woman withholds information about the true identity of the prince's mother and asks the king to find that out himself.

8. UNFOUNDED CLAIMS

The king's favourite wives put up false claims, each insisting that she is the mother of the prince.

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9. DIFFICULT TASK

A day is set apart for the child to identify his real mother. Each wife is to cook her best dish. The one whose dish attracts the boy will be recognized as his mother.

10. SOLUTION

On the appointed day, Omalinze, guided by a flutist, identifies the hated wife as her mother, bypassing the lavish dishes of the favourite wives and eating hers gustily in her isolated hut.

11. RECOGNITION

The favourite wives are exposed as false claimants. (N/B RECOGNITION and the subsequent function, EXPOSURE, are often assimilated as in this case).

12. TRANSFIGURATION

The hated wife is lifted from the garbage keep and given a new appearance by being washed and dressed up in new and expensive clothes.

13. WEDDING

The marriage between the hated wife and the king is at last consummated. The king ascends the upper storey of his house with her and henceforth she becomes the most favoured wife and the mistress of the royal household.

It seems quite clear from the foregoing, that Propp's syntagmatic model of structural analysis applies very well to some if not most Igbo folktales of the order of *akuko-ifo*. In the cases examined, it can be seen that the functions are not only the basic building-blocks of the tales but that they do appear in fairly logical, often natural and predictable patterns. These patterns are peculiar to the *ifo*. An examination of the structure of other genres of the Igbo folktale, such as *akuko-ala* (historical tale, including myth, legend and various forms of factual accounts), will show that they defy consistent analysis in terms of the Proppian model although they do occasionally, make use of some of its morphological elements in the same way as *ifo* occasionally makes use of certain traits and incidents of the traditional hero pattern which properly belong to *akuko-ala*. What we have found in our studies so far is that the Proppian model offers a practical touchstone not only for clearly distinguishing *akuko-ifo* from *akuko-ala*

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but also for the internal classification of the types of *akuko-ifo* in terms of structure.

It is, however, not enough to establish the applicability of the Proppian model to the folktales of another culture. Our projects in the morphological analysis of Igbo folktales suggest that we can go beyond the original taxonomic ends of the model to the more practical ends of deducing certain ethnographic and historiographic realia from the frequency patterns of certain functions: furthermore, in the study of the dynamics of the oral narrative art, there are possibilities that the model can be viewed as a kind of grammar of the folktale against which narrative competence in various performances can be measured. The rest of this paper will be concerned with aspects of these possible implications of applying the model to the study of the Igbo folktale.

6. AESTHETIC, ETHNOGRAPHIC AND HISTORIOGRAPHIC IMPLICATIONS

Not enough work has been done on Igbo folktales on the basis of Propp's model to establish it firmly as a kind of grammar of the folktale against which artistic competence can be measured. But the possibilities are there. The tales analyses so far by my students in their projects are those in the popular, modernized and often bowdlerized, editions in print, such as *Omalinze* (Ugochukwu, et. al., 1972), *Mbediogu* (Ogbalu, n.d.), *Nza na Obu* (Ogbalu, n.d.), *Mmoo Mmuo* (Ogbalu, n.d.), *Akuko ifo Ufodu Kwesiri ka Umu mmadu mara* (Iwe, 1963), *Oka Mgba* (Iroaganachi, 1973), and the even less traditional English versions such as *The Calabash of Wisdom and other Igbo Tales* (Egudu, 1973) *Iko the Wrestler and other tales* (Ekweni, 1947), *Tales of the Land of Death* (Okeke, 1972) and, worst of all, *The Way We Lived* (Umeasiegbu, 1969). It is clear that these "tales retold" collections are by no means typical of the Igbo folktale tradition. There are not edited transcripts of the tales as captured from live, traditional, oral performances but versions remembered or pieced together by their editors, or shall we say, authors in the case of Umeasiegbu's *The Way We Lived*. They have all passed through the chirographic consciousness and thus lost much of their orality and traditionality. As Walter Ong consistently stresses in his book *Orality and Literacy* (1982), the culture of the written or printed word tends to enforce certain habits of logicity which run counter to the mode of operation (or the logic) of the oral mind. An editor who retells a tale remembered for a reading public may find it necessary to straighten out certain apparent illogicalities and by so doing end up producing something far removed from the

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original. Such an editor may find the occurrence of ABSENTATION before INTERDICTION rather illogical and reverse the order, because in real life, INTERDICTION (the command, request or admonition which elder members of the family direct to the younger ones before leaving the house) usually precedes the ABSENTATION itself. But the worldwide patterns in tales show that ABSENTATION is almost invariably mentioned first, so much so that it must be seen as a formulaic mode of narration to do so. A truly traditional tale can thus be distinguished from a modernized or bowdlerized version by such obvious transpositions of functions. Even an oral tale told by a literature narrator may tend to deviate from the traditional patterns in the same way. The possibility then exist that the Proppian model may provide a basis for establishing the traditionality of a tale and the aesthetic orientation of the performer.

Artistic competence can thus be measured in terms of conformity to or deviation from the Proppian model. Presumably, a competent traditional artist will generate tales which conform to the pattern while immature or less competent performers will indulge in omissions, transpositions, anticipations, distortions and other types of performance error. There is thus the possibility that the model may provide an objective basis, in the study of individual style, for the comparison of various levels of artistic competence, e.g. between adult and child narrators, male and female narrators, professionals and amateurs, and so on. In this kind of comparison, the factors of assimilation, deviation and distortion must be carefully noted.

A number of other possible aesthetic implications of the Proppian model are highlighted in Dundes's Introduction to the Second Edition of the *Morphology*, and these must be of interest to the student of the Igbo folktale:

Propp's *Morphology* may also have important implications for studies of thinking and learning processes. To what extent is the structure of the fairy tale related to the structure of the ideal success story in a culture? (This also asks whether actual behaviour is critically influenced by the type of fairy-tale structure found in a given culture). And how precisely is fairy-tale structure learned? Does the child unconsciously extrapolate fairy-tale structure from hearing many individual fairy tales? Do children become familiar enough with the general nature of fairy-tale morphology to object to or question a deviation from it by a storyteller? (This kind of question may be investigated by field and laboratory experiments. For example, part of an actual or fictitious (=non-traditional) fairy tale containing the first several functions of Propp's analysis could be presented to a child who would be asked to

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"finish" the story. His completion could be checked against the rest of Propp's functions. Or a tale could be told with a section left out, e.g., the donor sequence, functions 12-14, and the child asked to fill in the missing portion. Such tests might also be of value in studies of child psychology. Presumably, the kind of choices made by a child might be related to his personality. For example, does a little boy select a female donor figure to aid him against a male villain? Does a little girl select a male donor figure to assist her against her wicked step-mother? In any case, while there have been many studies of language learning, there have been very few dealing with the acquisition of folklore. Certainly children "learn" riddle structure almost as soon as they learn specific riddles. Propp's *Morphology* thus provides an invaluable tool for the investigation of the acquisition of folklore (1968:xv).

There is no doubt that studies of the child as performer of the Igbo folktale, such as those by Ifezulike (1980) and Edeafia (1983) would have benefited exceedingly by probing some of these questions in relation to the topics. But the field is still wide open and the challenges are as strong as ever.

Let us now conclude by examining the potential value of the Proppian model as an instrument for the elicitation of ethnographic and historiographic facts from raw folktale data. A close look at the list of 31 functions will show that each is essentially a type of socially standardized action: a habit, a custom, a ritual, a mode of survival, etc. Each has a place in everyday social life and in the wider traditional rites of passage. ABSENTATIONS usually highlight the traditional occupations of the ordinary folk: going to the farm, going to a distant market, going to a hunt, going on a visit, going to a festival in another town, etc. And in the INTERDICTIONS which usually follow we have hints of the tight web of reciprocal obligations and unwritten contracts which bind individuals and individuals, communities and communities and the individual and the group to which he belongs. The primacy of the family as a unit of social organization is stressed in the frequency of occurrence of INTERDICTIONS requiring the strict obedience of children to the admonitions of their parents and for parents to heed the wishes of their children. And in wider social relations, the primacy of the communal weal is expressed in INTERDICTIONS which require strict observance of taboos and respect to communal agreement, as when in the land of animals it is agreed that each animal must contribute the meat of his mother to be shared by all the animals as a relief in the heat of the great famine. But the INTERDICTIONS must be violated, otherwise there would be no tale. The VIOLATIONS themselves tend to offer the opportunity for ritual confrontations

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with the numerous antagonistic forces, in folk-belief and in reality, to which the violator of communal norms must be beholden. Functions Nº 4-8 fall within the realms of action of such antagonistic forces while functions Nºs 9-19 mirror the various resources in traditional life and belief on which the individual relies for survival, notably recourse to the *dibia* for divination of problems and the provision of magical agents. These are only samples of immense possibilities.

There is indeed no doubt that the Proppian model can provide a telescopic window on the traditional life and history of any society to whose tales it is successfully applied. In this respect, the student of the Igbo folktale should look carefully at the actual content or reference of each function and relate his discoveries to Igbo culture and history. Thus, each common function can be studied both in isolation and in the various patterns in which it occurs. LACK, for example, occurs frequently in two forms: as a great famine or as the lack of a male successor. We can follow through the occurrences of these and other allomotifs of LACK in a large corpus of Igbo tales and then make our deductions concerning their ethnohistoriographic significance. In my own consideration of the details of the great famine reported in many Igbo folktales I have arrived at the hypothesis that this refers, not to the seasonal hunger which comes up every year after the planting season as Umeasiegbu (1969) suggests, but rather to a long, historic drought so dreadfully similar in its effects as the Sahel drought of today that it has survived in the memory of the folk as an imperishable symbol of MISFORTUNE. Similarly, the mindless cruelties which normally followed failures to solve the DIFFICULT TASKS often posed by the tyrants of Iduu may embody surviving folk impressions of life under the suzerainty of some ancient monarchies long swept away in Igboland. These data are no doubt subject to widely different interpretations. But each interpretation will add something significant to our understanding of a past wrapped up in signs, the meanings of which have been largely forgotten.

7. CONCLUSION

The student of the Igbo folktale, and indeed of the folktale traditions of other cultures, must go beyond Propp's formalism. He must use the tool provided by the *Morphology* not just to analyse the folktales at his disposal for the sake of

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analysis, but more importantly, as a way of discovering more about the fundamental aesthetic principles of the oral narrative performance and of probing the mass of ethnohistorical data which the tales clearly embody.

RESUMO: No presente trabalho o autor indica a relevância dos modelos de análise propostos por Vladimir Propp em 'Morphology of the Folktale' para os contos tradicionais Igbo. Apresentando previamente alguns critérios da metodologia de Propp, examina a morfologia de contos Igbo, a presença de elementos etnográficos, historiográficos e estéticos, bem como a eficácia desses modelos para o estudo de aspectos da narrativa oral.

UNITERMOS: Morfologia, Aplicabilidade, "Folktale" Igbo, Estética, Etnografia, Historiografia, Narrativa oral.

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