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Title: Verbal art of the Fon (Benin)

Issue Date: 2013-10-16

6. Topics: power and violations

The Fongbe **hwènùxó** has three main topics: power, conflicts and taboos. The topic of power is elaborated in the divine power of the gods and the functional power of the powerful of the earth, the kings and the chiefs. The second topic is about conflicts of abundance, food and sex or the lack of one of these. The third topic concerns the sacral duties and the violation of taboos.

6.1. The topic of power

The corpus shows many examples that present the issue of power. The stories elaborate on the topic of power. It is obvious that the power of the gods is involved in this topic as well, since the stories refer to the kingdom, its religion and traditions. The central participant is the incarnation of a god that is embodied in a character that is a utensil, an animal or a human being. The central participant uses his divine or supernatural power to break the worldly power of Agent B and to stop the conflict with Agent A. I described the religious (supernatural) power in depth in the previous chapter. Here, I will describe the functional power that divides the agents. Kings abuse their absolute power. On the other hand, a hunter or an orphan are smarter than the king, for they are survivors. The behaviour of the agents reminds us of the fixed position of the ministers in the kingdom. The ones that sat at the king's right were 'wise' men; those on the left were 'powerful' men (see also A 4: 153, 155, AC 16: 16 and p. 18).

Deceit and deception are a common practice in the stories. Deceit manifests itself by lies. Deception shows trickery or fraud. The most powerful human agent of the stories is the **tomèxósu**, 'chief of the country'. A number of stories presents the king or chief and describes the unequal relation between the powerful chief and the marginal commoner. Several stories figure human agents and their conflicts about theft, food and sex. In the trickster stories, the topics are similar, but the approach differs: **Yògbó** challenges the powerful agents, whether they are gods or ancestors, by deceiving them, and he often gets away with it.

6.2. The power of the powerful

Performers convey the notion of power in many ways. Let us consider the following fragment from a story from Ayou (Ay 2):

'After that answer
His Majesty the king,
took the pipe from his mouth
and smiled with ease.

And he looked the winner, the new heir to the throne, straight in the eyes.
 And the shot of the gun went Bang!
 Bang! Bang!
 And three shots were fired.
 And the crowd started to cheer, tapping their fingers on their mouths.⁵⁵

After this happened,
 one hit the drum and one started to play the drums,
 and the celebration began, and they started the celebration.⁷

The fragment shows that **Dada Ségbó**, the Great Spirit, does not speak, but gives a signal by taking the pipe from his mouth, before he smiles and looks the new heir to the throne straight in the eyes. The king shows off his power by gestures. Verdier described similar scenes in Togolese stories: the heir to the throne had to win a contest to establish his high position (Verdier 1973, I: 42). The scene relates to the prerogative of the King of **Danxomè** to choose the heir to the throne, for succession was not a birthright. Quite the contrary, the heir to the throne had to put all his efforts into seizing the sceptre (see 1.2.).

In several stories, the performers stereotypically contrast a marginal central participant with a pair of powerful agents to characterize the relations of power. Here, the qualitative ‘powerful’ has two meanings. On the one hand, it denotes the tacit properties of Agent A that make him survive; on the other hand, it stands for the power behind the throne, which is the influence of Agent B.

Eco designed a general framework to describe the combination of characters in Fleming’s James Bond thrillers (Eco 1966: 79ff.). Eco’s technique nicely demonstrates what Bauman calls the ‘way of speaking’. This technique is helpful to capture the contrasts between Agent A and Agent B in the dramatic stories. The Agent A of these stories is an ancestor or invisible being who has little possessions, such as the orphan, the hunter, and the ‘spirit man’ who has no visible body (AC 6, AC 10). The Agent B of these stories is greedy in spite of his wealth and possessions.

The king in the stories relates to the former kings and their privileges. He literally owns his people and has the right to **dù**, ‘eat’, that is to disown their possessions and to be delighted to do so. On the other hand, the king is the looser at the end of the story that leaves him empty-handed. Let us consider for example, the marginal orphan who has no possessions. His survival depends on the goodwill of the king

⁵⁵ This is a tail-head construction that the performer emphasized by an extensive pause (see chapter 9 and section 10.1.).

(AC 6, AC 9). The performers indicate the properties of the opposite agents at the beginning of the story. The contrast increases when the story moves forward. The list shows the contrast in roles and accessory paraphernalia of the pair of agents. It also shows the Fongbe belief system that values the tacit properties of the orphan who fairly is a peer of the gods. The king only has worldly power that finally does not help him very much. Using the technique of Eco, the properties can be listed as follows:

Orphan in the Stories

Loner
 Poor
 On his own
 Powerless
 Youngster
 Speaks
 Friends as company
 Walks in the bush
 Works in the field (serf)
 Clever
 Has links with the gods/ancestors
 At peace

King in the Stories

Two wives at least
 Rich
 Daughters (dowry)
 Mighty
 Adult
 Linguist is speaker
 Formal dignitaries
 Stays in the palace
 No physical work
 Complacent
 Organization of spies
 Involved in wars

Eco's technique is helpful to indicate the contrast that the performers use to emphasize the differences between the orphan and the king when the denouement approaches. The result of the list after Eco is analogous to the one that Steinbrich gave about the images of the powerful (Steinbrich 1995: 100). Steinbrich listed the following antagonistic poles that represent the Lyela orphan and king in Burkina Faso:

Orphan

Young
 Powerless
 Without wife/mother
 Raw food
 Walks around in the bush
 Clever from hard life

King

Old
 Mighty
 Many wives
 Cooked food
 Stays in the village
 Weak from comfortable life

Performers use this duality in properties to highlight the power topic in the stories. The similarity of these lists makes obvious that the properties of the orphan are widely known in the region. The Fon orphan is as powerless as the orphan in Burkina Faso is. I will pick up this issue again when I introduce the technique of the storyboard (chapter 19).

Gods, kings and chiefs have a salient property that illustrates their power: they are the only agents in the stories who do not speak in public. **Dada Ségbó** does not speak to the winner of a contest in a **Ỳgbó** story (Ay 2). Not speaking is a sign of power. Gods and kings have messengers to communicate their message. In one version of ‘The day to thresh the millet’ about the millet ceremony, **Dada Ségbó** sends his messengers to force the denouement (AC 4). The story about the orphan who has neither father nor mother figures two kings. Neither of these kings uses a linguist. The first one is the king of the country of the orphan’s mother who addresses the orphan, and therewith shows that he is a cheat. On the other hand, the king of the country of the father of the orphan has a **gbesetó** ‘spokesman’ and a **gandótó** ‘royal crier’; however, when he wants to have the orphan’s supernatural ring, he makes his daughter speak, and steal the ring for him. He shows that he is a real king (AC 6).

The corpus has three different versions of the ‘Cat and leopard’ story that were told in three different villages. Each of them shows a fine example of the use of power and manipulation. The king, embodied by the leopard, knows that the people highly estimate the traditional doctor, embodied by the cat, so he decides to discredit him. However, all his efforts are in vain, even when he tries to act as a daredevil (AC 16, A 7 and Ay 5).⁵⁶ The king in these stories is an arrogant predator. The leopard in these stories has similar properties as the leopard king in Igbo tales. Azuonye described the leopard king in Igbo tales not only as the symbol of the predatory king, but also as the symbol of the naked power and arrogance of the aristocracy (Azuonye 1995: 72f.). The Fongbe performers made the leopard speak in all three stories of the corpus to convince the audience that the leopard is a pretender and an unreliable chief.

In general these stories do not deliver win-win situations; they describe the ugly win-lose situations that abuse of power may entail. The increase of power of one of the agents reduces the power of the other one.

⁵⁶ Notice that the performers of these stories say that the leopard and the cat are stepsisters; they are women. See also p. 74 about the Fon habit that one does not say openly a person’s name.

6.3. Wealth, food and sex

The stories often mention staple food and cereals, such as **gbadé** ‘maize’, **galí** ‘grated and roasted manioc’, **lì** ‘millet’, and **wǒ** ‘porridge made of cornmeal’. Performers talk about meals and snacks that have beans or peanuts as ingredients, for example **kwíkwí**, lengthy fried chips that are made from peanuts and hot red peppers. Some stories name famine and the lack of meat. It is clear that **làn**, ‘animal’, is a scarce commodity. The main issue of several stories is that an animal is a living being and also somebody’s child that has to be killed before one can eat the meat, as for example in the ‘Cat and leopard’- stories.

One of the stories told in Ayou is staged at the market of the ancestors where the orphan gets his food during a famine. This story lists various food vendors. There are the following stalls: **atánó**, the woman with the bean fritters, **ginó**, the woman with the fermented porridge, **tevíno**, the woman with yam, **nùdúdu dǐbùnó**, the women with all kinds of food, **hwesahutó**, the fishmongers, **lannò nǔ tenmenò kpó**, the butchers. There are also many different snacks for sale: **atá cici**, the spicy bean fritters, **abobo kpínkpan**, the white beans puree, **adavlò ami d’é jí**, the white beans puree topped with red palm oil sauce (Ay 4). It is clear that food is a major factor in the daily life of the villagers. Livestock is a symbol of wealth. The story of the two friends describes wealth as power in terms of the rewarding market rights of **Aja** and becoming the kings’ linguist, which is a much sought-after position (AC 5, see also chapter 5).

A number of stories tell about conflicts between people that affect the dwelling or the clan. The theft of food often happens, though the aftermath is different (AC 1, 2, 3, 4, A 5). There are several stories about stealing somebody’s food or replacing it by one’s excrements or one’s genitals. One story tells that a wife eats the hunter’s snails and replaces them by her genitals (AC 1); a second story tells that the first wife eats the sauce of her younger co-wife and destroys it by defecating in the sauce (AC 3). The penalty is death (AC 1, A 5), or exile (AC 2).

Some stories show that there is a difference between the ownership and the possession of a special object. The god or spirit who provides the object owns a magic object. If an agent gets extraordinarily wealthy thanks to a divine object, the wealth still increases as long as the object is in his possession. If a thief steals the object, the former keeper loses everything he possessed. The thief becomes the keeper and gets the wealth that goes with it (AC 6). On the other hand, the keeper of a divine gift often loses his possessions when he forgets the due religious sacrifices (AC 8).

The stories clearly disapprove of theft. The penalty is harsh: death or exile. On the other hand, the contrary happens in the trickster stories where the trickster continuously deceives the agents while he escapes punishment.

6.4. Benevolence, malevolence and taboos

Stories about benevolence and malevolence refer to duties and obligations. The **Yèhwe Zogbannɔ** stories are about benevolence and malevolence (AC 7, AC 19). The Fon people believe that the python **Dan** is the **vodun** who is the incarnation of **Măwũ**. He kills the man who neglects the obligatory libations (AC 8). Friends are supposed to help each other, kings are supposed to be just, and all human beings are supposed to show humility by sacrificing to the deities (AC 5, AC 6, AC 8). The corpus also contains several stories that deal with the violation of taboos, such as telling a secret to somebody else. Trees and shrubs are the places where a god seeks shelter for a while. From there they speak up freely on the condition that the people to whom they speak must keep the secret to themselves (Ay 1, AC 1, AC 8, AC 10). The **Yěyè** stories are about metamorphoses and the necessity to keep these a secret as well (Ay 1, AC 10).

Several stories show the human incapacity to deal with the divine plagues, like madness and evil (AC 12, 13, 14, 15, 18). Furthermore, the corpus shows two ‘erotic’ tales that also refer to religious devices (AC 9, AC 11). Obviously, sexual harassment also is a taboo and is not accepted.

Many of the Fon taboos are obvious; dishonesty and fraud are perfidious acts that undermine any community or society. The taboos figure in the stories as undesirable human misbehaviour, like jealousy, lies and slander, arrogance, disrespect, hatred, neglect, attempted murder or homicide. The agents B see external factors as famine or war as causes of the felony. The topic of the taboo of killing one’s own children is prominent in a number of stories, casting different agents. The story about ‘Cat and leopard’ shows this taboo. The cat does not eat the meat of the leopard cubs, nor does she serve it to her children. She cooks the meat once more, prepares a fresh sauce, and returns the meal to the leopard. The taboo concerns the interdiction to kill one’s children or to eat them. The Moon keeps her children in the Fongbe and the Mina stories, as the cat does in the Fongbe stories. On the other hand, the god Sun kills his children, as the leopard does. However, the Sun is a god, and henceforth his children change into fishes, definitely for the good of men. This taboo suits the Fon morale, as well as the one of the neighbouring Mina (AC 17; Verdier 1973 II: 181).⁵⁷

⁵⁷ The story that Verdier published is an explanation of the lunar eclipse. This is identical to the Calavi story. However, the performer of the Mina story tells a different story with a content that is similar to one of the ‘Cat and leopard’-stories in the corpus (see chapter 19).

6.5. The tricksterstories: deceit and deception

The trickster stories show a model of the world that is the opposite of the above-described stories. The **yèxó**, ‘trickster stories’, show one single topic that is tricking. The trickster is the central participant, and the main topic is about tricking somebody to rob him of his food, his possessions, or even his life, without getting the penalty afterwards. The aim of his deceit is to be better off. Therefore, the trickster violates taboos, and still, he is rewarded for his wavering loyalty by getting the booty.

Let us consider the topic of one of the trickster stories that were told in Ayou. The performer called this story ‘The first story’. The story tells how the reign of the world got into the hands of a human being (Ay 2). The story is about **Dada Ségbó**, the Great Spirit ancestor who has three daughters that he wants to marry off to one husband. Therefore, he organises a contest about three objects that he hid. The trickster **Adonnye** is also in the room of the king where he spies upon him. He sees how the king prepares the contest by putting the butterfly and the rat each in a calabash, and the chameleon in a shawl. The trickster wants to help his stepbrother to win the contest. This man’s name is **Ahwansoblenó**, meaning ‘impostor of the contest’. The trickster reveals the secret to his stepbrother **Ahwansoblenó**, who by chance forgets the secret several times. However, the trickster secretly communicates through a whistle and his stepbrother finally wins the contest. **Dada** is pleased that someone won the contest. He does not know that he is deceived. He gives his three daughters and half of his possessions to his new son-in-law. **Dada Ségbó** is the owner of the universe; he stays in heaven and the smart cheat wins the earth and the power and wealth that go with it. He is the new owner of the world.⁵⁸

In the trickster stories, there is a lot of savoury food that smells good, and for which all Fon children lust. However, they do not dare to steal it, as their hero does indeed. In one of the stories, there is a famine in the real world. The trickster secretly follows the orphan to the market of the ancestors and he succeeds in stealing food from the orphan and the old woman. However, the old woman catches the trickster and puts him in a hole, and the orphan leaves them. The hyena passes and the trickster deceives the hyena and puts it in the hole.⁵⁹ The trickster escapes, and in the end the hyena gets the penalty (Ay 4). In a second story, the trickster deceives the leopard that tries to steal his meal. The trickster convinces the leopard that he must try another hairdo to find a mate. However, he ties his hair to the branch of a tree. The termites, which embody the ancestors, save the leopard from falling. The

⁵⁸ During the performance the performer changes the name **Ahwansoblenó** into **Soliblenó**, ‘the impostor consolidates’, and at the end **Ahwansoliviblenó**, ‘the sweat impostor of the contest’.

⁵⁹ Please note that this market is the market of the ancestors, and ‘hole’ also has ‘grave’ as a connotation.

trickster takes revenge and he deceives the termites by stealing the drinks that the leopard, as promised, had bought for them (Ay 7).

In a third story, the bush animals ask the trickster to kill the child of a ferocious animal. The lizard sees this happening and accuses *Yḍgbó*, who blames the lizard and cuts its tongue. The lizard is incapable of speaking up anymore and the bush animals slaughter the lizard (Ay 8). In a trickster story told in Abomey the trickster tries to rob the billy goat of a bullock that the billy goat had won. However, the billy goat succeeds in getting it back (A 10). Only one story mentions the deception of the trickster himself. The elders in the Land of Sky succeed in deceiving the trickster and chase him from the abundant quantities of food in the House of Rain (Ay 3). In all other stories, the trickster gets away without punishment.

The stories about the Fon *Yḍgbó* show that he is just as greedy as the Ewe trickster *Yiyi*. On the other hand, the Fongbe trickster stories differ from the comic Ewegbe stories that Konrad published, for they do not show features related to sex and excrement (Konrad 1994: 64).⁶⁰

⁶⁰ These features only occur in the Fongbe dramatic stories.