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7. The genre

This section deals with the characteristics of the Fon genre **hwènùxó**. The starting point is that the **hwènùxó** story is the performance of a story that is rooted in the culture and the religion of the Fon people who live in the rural areas of the south of Benin at the time of recording in 1976.

In this section, I will discuss the nature of the stories in terms of a narrative genre. I will start with the characteristics that the performers gave. I will consider the following three aspects of the **hwènùxó** that occur in the corpus: the dramatic stories, the trickster stories, and the moral extension in the songs. This will lead to a first classification in terms of genre. I will finally discuss the classifications in previous publications.

7.1. The Fongbe hwènùxó

The performers called the stories of the corpus **hwènùxó**. The performers said that **hwènùxó** are stories that happened in the past or stories that might have happened in the past. The word **hwènù** literally means ‘mouth of sun’, that is ‘time’, and **xó** means ‘words’ (Segurola and Rassinoux 2000: 249). A second analysis is that **hwènù** means ‘when’ that occurs in a WHEN-clause (see 10.1.). According to Guédou the stories are the words of the elders that relate to an event in the past (see 1.5.1.). The performers themselves consider the stories either ‘history’ or ‘fiction’. It is crucial to notice that the duality is inherent to the system of the Fongbe **hwènùxó**, which apparently perceives history and fiction as a set of similar entities that stem from the past. Storytellers used the stories for educating children and entertaining the audience.

The setting of the stories is the world of the rural Fon people. This world consists of a series of dwellings, of the market in a nearby village and of **dñ**, meaning ‘over there’ or ‘the supernatural world’ (see 5.1.). The religious cults and devices play an important role in these stories. The central participant of the dramatic stories has divine power due to **Fa**, the diviner and the guardian spirit. The central participant objects to the practice of human vices and its fatal consequences, for example the effects of misbehaviour such as the neglect of the due sacrifices. The stories reflect real life and refer to the envy of those who have access to food, sex and money. Moreover, all stories have one of the following elements in common: the power of the supernatural, interdictions and commands, and the violation of taboos. The majority of the stories have no morale at the end of the story. The main reason is that the denouement and the penalty of the culprit speak for themselves. Performers sometimes end a story with the expression ‘That is why’ just to indicate that they make an end to their story. The performer seldom spontaneously delivers morale;

the audience has to ask for an explanation. On the other hand, the performer who wishes to make a moral statement inserts a song by the central participant. One of the main features of the **hwènùxó** is that they report the importance of the religious devices and the support of the gods.

However, the corpus shows a clear distinction between the dramatic stories and the comic trickster stories: dramatic stories focus on human behaviour and the necessity to consult the guardian spirit; comic stories show the smartness of the trickster. Subsequently, I will discuss two distinct subgenres: the **hwènùxó** – dramatic stories – and the **yèxó** – comic stories. Both subgenres have each a different message. The dramatic stories convey that the initially powerful agent pays the penalty for the misery he caused in the story. The comic stories show that the trickster even deceives the powerful, although he sometimes has a narrow escape.

7.2. The subgenre **hwènùxó**: dramatic stories

The central participant in dramatic stories is the guardian spirit who is embodied in an object, an animal or a god. Dramatic stories have the following elements in common: the use of formulae, the transformation of gods into human beings or animals, the consultation of the diviner of the guardian spirit, and the denouement by the central participant.

21 out of 29 performances in Abomey-Calavi and Abomey start with a formula. The opening formula points at the essence of the **hwènùxó** that encounters a topic that belongs to the Fongbe society. The opening formula is the following:

hwènù-xó **cé** **z̀n** **m̀** **v̀in** **bó** **yí** **m̀**
 time-GEN.speech POS₁ move AV IP CJss get find
 ‘my story took off to fly, fast hovering around like a bird, and it landed upon’

The formula uses the metaphor of a bird. Fon people credit birds with the properties of the gods who are able to journey between the sky and the earth. The opening formula compares the movement of the story to the hovering around of a bird: **v̀in** is the Fongbe ideophone of the fast and long lasting hovering around of a bird through the air.⁶¹ Sometimes the word **gée** is used which expresses the going to an intentional goal. The performers in Abomey-Calavi and Abomey end their performance by simply saying ‘My story ends here’, or ‘That is it!’. They also use the expression ‘My story ends here at the top of the little toe!’, meaning ‘the end’. Performers sometimes use the Gungbe word **ajlu**, ‘story’, that is synonymous to the Fongbe **hwènùxó**.

⁶¹ Segurola reports the ideophone as **v̀in** (Segurola 1968: 557).

After the opening formula, the performers start the actual story with the naming of the pair of agents and the topic (see chapter 11). Agents represent the dual nature of the gods of the Fongbe pantheon who are also two sides of a coin (see 5.5.).

This subgenre **hwènùxó** is intrinsically dramatic, for it ends with the penalty of the culprit agent who has to pay for violating a taboo. The stories name two penalties that are both terrible in the Fon society: the agent must leave the dwelling, i.e. he goes into exile, or he dies as the inevitable consequence of his crime. However, what happens to the agent to whom harm is done? The stories do not mention a victory or a happy end after the punishment. At the end, there is neither reconciliation nor reward. The story does not change society, and the victim learns that there is no escape from the world as it is.

This subgenre shows also a small number of specific dramatic stories that have the described elements, but also slightly distinct elements. The number is too small to facilitate a thorough analysis. Therefore, I will only give a brief description. These stories also are **hwènùxó**, according to the performers and to Guédou's classification (Guédou 1985). The stories are dramatic stories, for they end with either the perpetuity of misfortune or the punishment of the culprit.

Three **hwènùxó** of the corpus are **tàn**, 'history of the clan'; in this case the Zomagba clan. The performers indicate at the start that the story happened 'a long time ago', or 'in those days' (AC 12, AC 13, AC 19; Guédou 1985: 409). Actually, these three stories are open-ended, for they may go on infinitely. One of these stories uses a remarkable 'call-and-response' technique between the performer and the audience that Finnegan described (Finnegan 1992: 98). The story cherishes the memory of King **Adjahuto** who founded the **Adanhunsa** market in Allada and the daughter of **Gawu**, the chief of the king's army (AC 13). The Abomey-Calavi 12 story tells about the burden of insanity. It refers to the expression **ká kpó go kpó**, 'calabashes and gourds', meaning a person's assets (possessions and people). The diviner advises to break all bottles and plates to heal the insanity. Maupoil recites the same topic (Maupoil 1988: 614). The Abomey-Calavi 19 story points out the divine status of twins (see pp. 82-84).

The performers consider **núbàsó**, 'dilemma tales', also **hwènùxó**. One story of the corpus is a dilemma tale (A 9). This story ends with the solution of the dilemma. The Fongbe classification according to Guédou distinguishes two categories of **núbàsó**, the brief riddles and the relatively longer dilemma tales (Guédou 1985: 413, 416).

Furthermore, the corpus shows two 'amorous' stories that also refer to religious devices (AC 9 and AC 11; see also 6.3.). These stories are about sexual harassment by women. One of the stories refers to **Bligede**, the **vodun** of the **xé**, 'prickly shrub', whose society **zàngbètó** wears raphia clothes. At night, they protect the villagers

against thieves. They also produce chairs for passers-by in the area that surrounds Abomey-Calavi (AC 10 and Ay 1; Désiré Vigan, personal communication).

7.3. The subgenre *yèxó*: comic stories

Yògbó is the central participant of the Fongbe *yèxó*, ‘stories about **Yè**’, as the performers in Ayou call him. The trickster’s name changes to **Yè** when he enters the supernatural world. The Fongbe *yè* means ‘spirit’ and ‘somebody’s double’ (see also p. 76). **Yògbó** is the impersonation of a bold character who challenges gods and ancestors, and who often gets off in spite of his tricks. It is clear that he is neither divine nor human though he is said to be capable of travelling to the supernatural world and back.⁶² Trickster stories have in common that their setting often is the supernatural world. This world is either the Land of Sky where the elders live, or the market of the ancestors where the orphan finds his food (Ay 3, Ay 4).

Five out of eight performances in Ayou are about the trickster ‘Fat big **Yò**’ or **Yè** (Ay 2, 3, 4, 7, 8; see also 14.1. Style). The trickster stories differ from the dramatic stories in so far that the trickster is the powerful central participant. The agents in the Ayou 2 story are the following: **Dada Ségbó**, ‘Great Spirit’, and the trickster’s stepbrother **Ahwansoblenó**. They figure in ‘The first story’ that relates how the trickster pilfers the world from the eldest god (Ay 2). The Ayou 3 story stages the African harrierhawk and the elders as agents: the trickster travels to the Land of Sky hidden in the feathers of **gangan**, ‘the African harrier hawk’, but he is chased from the House of Rain by a crafty trick of the **mèxo**, ‘the elders’ (Ay 3). The agents in the Ayou 4 story are the orphan and the hyena: the trickster wants to accompany **nɔcyòvi**, ‘the orphan’, to the market of the ancestors. At the market, the orphan finally gets bored with the trickster and leaves him with the old woman and **hla**, ‘the hyena’, that wants to kill the trickster who succeeds in having a narrow escape (Ay 4). The agents in the Ayou 7 story are the leopard and the termites. **Kpò**, ‘the leopard’, wants to steal the food from the trickster who deceives the leopard by tying him into a tree. **Kósú**, ‘the termites’, save the leopard’s life, but when they arrive to get their reward, it appears that the trickster got in first and took all the food and drinks (Ay 7).⁶³ The Ayou 8 story stages the following agents: the small ferocious animal and the grey lizard. The trickster kills **kanlínvi** ‘the small ferocious animal’ at the request of the bush animals. **Alotó**, ‘the grey lizard’ sees this happening. He accuses the trickster who, at his turn, cuts the lizard’s tongue to prevent him from

⁶² Notice that the trickster crashed when he jumped across the rope that the elders tethered to the steep pit that separates sky and earth (Ay 3).

⁶³ The performer creates confusion by using **sò** alternately as ‘tomorrow’ and ‘yesterday’ (see also p. 193).

speaking up, whereupon the bush animals kill the lizard (Ay 8; see also p. 96). It is obvious that one of the agents plays the part of the deceived one; he is punished for the trickster's crimes and misbehaviour. The **yèxó**, 'trickster stories', are comic for two reasons. First, **Yǒgbó** goes unpunished whether he violates taboos or challenges gods and ancestors. Moreover, nobody is capable of competing against him when it comes to deceit and deception.

The Fongbe word **adɔnɔ** literally means 'owner of the web', though my consultant always translated it into the French 'ogre', that is 'the big eater'. The trickster in the corpus continuously tries to outwit his opponents. The performers call him 'Mr Big' and 'Sir', which are titles that the Fon use to address wise men. This solemn form of address also emphasizes the comic nature of these stories.

The performers in Ayou also considered the following stories as trickster stories: 'Rooster and elephant' and the comic version of the 'Cat and leopard' (Ay 6, Ay 5). Both stories stage a small central participant, respectively a rooster and a kitten that deceive a much bigger adversary by using a trick. The aphorism of these stories refers to one of the 256 maxims of **Fa**: a very small thing causes a lot of trouble. Notice that the Ayou version of the 'Cat and leopard' story is a comic story that considerably differs from the two other dramatic versions in the corpus.⁶⁴

The two dramatic versions of the 'Cat and leopard'-stories use the word **awíí** 'cat' (AC 16, A 7). The Abomey-Calavi 16 story was told at night, though the word is said to be prohibited at night (Guédou 1985: 428). On the other hand, the Ayou performer used the word **awíí** in the first utterance of his performance that took place in the morning, but he continued with the **Ayizɔgbe** word **adeé** (Ay 5). The performer of a story in Abomey-Calavi uses the **Gengbè** word **asé** (AC 6).

Trickster stories are not open-ended. The trickster's counterparts always find out his deceit, though he himself rarely is punished for his misbehaviour. On the contrary, at the end, the trickster has a narrow escape. An innocent agent pays the penalty, for he pays the price for his stupidity of getting involved with the trickster. This is contrary to the dramatic stories that end with the penalty of the culprit. The trickster always manipulates the agents, until he blames the innocent agent, who is naive, for the deception that he caused himself. The crowd exiles or kills the credulous agent.

The comic **yèxó** stories from Ayou have no opening formula as the dramatic **hwènùxó** have. The performers of the comic stories comment on the central participant and his exploits before starting their performance. These clauses are spontaneous remarks. The performer's anticipation of the trickster's actions and motives before he starts the performance is shown by the following example:

⁶⁴ Here, gender is a decisive factor; men tell comic stories, and women tell dramatic stories. See also p. 63 ff, and 5.5. Religious devices.

yè d́ó kp̀ò ́ ś lá lan
 yè put leopard DEF branch hurt
 yè wè é kún d̀ò wèn d̀e ó
 yè aFOC 3SG NEG be message INDF NEG

‘Yè lured the leopard in the tree to kill him; it was Yè, he gave an important message’ (Ay 7).

The performers end all eight performances with a final formula. The final formula conveys the truth of the story by using the metaphor of a bird. The closing formula is the following:

a jè t̀o godo gbejí ́ alwè na d́ó swé ée
 2SG fall water GEN.LOC away TOP_{CL} bird FUT say ADJ
 ‘If you go far behind the lagoon, the swallow discloses the truth.’

The performer of comic stories sometimes tells us why the trickster is capable of deceiving us all. The performer comments on the trickster’s behaviour, after the final formula, that is after the performance (Ay 4, Ay 8). The following example shows the comment:

nu é wútú wè adɔ-nɔ yɔgbo=kpó nù
 thing 3SG body aFOC web-GEN.owner yɔgbo=and thing
 d̀é=kpó
 INDEF=and⁶⁵

mɔ nɔ d́o d̀o nũ wu ǎ
 NEG RM put hole thing body NEG

b̀ò wu nɔ kú jè nù d̀é mé gbedé
 CJds body RM die fall thing INDF interior never

wu jan nɔ zin mɛ d́o d̀ò
 body precisely RM trick person put hole

‘That is why it did not happen that ‘the web’s owner’, *Ỳògbó* and anyone else, whoever he might be, were trapped together. And he never got trapped, he always fooled other people.’ (Fragment spoken after the performance of the story Ayou 8, 1976-04-30).

The performer also comments on ‘The rooster and the elephant’ by adding the following remark after the final formula: ‘The rooster was once again the hero.’

⁶⁵The transcription is based on the pauses that the performer made (see chapter 9.)

These comments on the **yèxó** are very illustrative. The performers consider the trickster a real being that is here with us. He is part of the Fon heritage. His adversaries do not kill him; they send him away. To no effect, for he will always come back and commit his ‘crimes’. The comic story ends with the death of the trickster’s victim.

The performers consider the trickster stories **hwènùxó**. The reason is the analogy of the setting and the religious aspects that also occur in the dramatic **hwènùxó**. All **hwènùxó**, dramatic and comic stories, are verbal art as defined by Bascom (Bascom 1965: 3). Fongbe verbal art is a narrative discourse that uses many poetic elements. I will discuss this in chapter 14, Style.

7.4. The extension with **hàn**, ‘songs’

Performers inserted twenty-three different **hàn** ‘songs’, in 19 out of the 37 stories of the corpus to convey the moral extension of the denouement. The central participant is always the singer of these songs. The song reveals the role of the central participant and lists his divine power. The song refers to a taboo or the violation of a prohibition, and nails the impostor that is Agent B. The performer always emphasizes that the central participant is about to sing a song, saying **é jì hàn**, ‘he gave birth to a song’, meaning that the song is already there to be performed. The song is a poetic narrative that conveys morale or a religious explanation. The dramatic and comic stories have 23 songs in total. The performers sang five songs in four comic stories (Ay 2, Ay 5, Ay 7, Ay 8); they sang 18 songs in 15 dramatic stories (Ay 1, AC 1, AC 2, AC 4, AC 5, AC 7, AC 8, AC 9, AC 10, AC 19, A 2, A 3, A 4, A 5, A 7).

After singing the song, the performer often adds that the central participant repeated the song several times. On the other hand, performers also repeat a song for dramatic reasons, such as in the story about the horned animals that arrive one after another, each time with more horns, in the distant field. In this story, the performer sang the song eight times (AC 7).

The performers sometimes insert ‘call and response’ songs. This happens in both comic and dramatic stories. In one comic story of the corpus, the ‘call and response’ songs are sung by alternately **Yǒgbó** and his stepbrother **Ahwansoblenó** (Ay 2). The performer of a dramatic story inserted two songs that she repeated three times. The first song conveys that the eldest son thwarted his father’s wish; the response song conveys the disbelief of the father. This song has twice an identical chorus that changes in the third response (A 3). The corpus also shows a story in which the central participant sings three different songs, of which the first one is repeated four

times and the second one is repeated three times; the last song is sung only once. This song provides us with a fatal end (AC 19).

The songs of the two versions of ‘The sadist co-wife’, for example, show different songs, although the difference concerns the objects that try to break the saucepot, the central participant. The song in Abomey-Calavi 2 is sung in the **Maxi** language, and lists the following stone objects: the big stone and the fireplace of three cone-formed stones. The song in Abomey 5 is in Abomey Fongbe. It lists the following wooden objects: the threshold, the drawknife to cut calabashes, the edge of a hoe, the wooden bed strut, and the wooden spoon that is meant for stirring the **wǎ**, ‘porridge’ (AC 2, A 5).

On the other hand, it also happens that similar stories have similar songs. This is the case of the two versions of ‘The day to thresh the millet’ (AC 4, A 4) and of ‘Hunter Little Finger and the chief’ (Ay 1, AC 10). The three stories about ‘Cat and leopard’, for example, have an identical topic, but only the comic edition of this story ends with a song by the central participant. This is the youngest cat who dares to sing a song that reflects his thorough contempt for the leopard, his aunt (Ay 5). The song tells about the eyes of the dead leopard cub that open and close as the eyes of a doll, when the cat grabs the head of the cub and shakes it back and forth (Ay 5).

Four of the seven comic stories from Ayou have a song. One of the **Yǎgbó** stories depicts how the trickster and his stepbrother **Ahwansobelenó**, ‘the impostor of the contest’, in short **belenó é**, meaning ‘my dear mad one’ speak a language that nobody understands (Ay 2).⁶⁶ The trickster conveys the secret by playing the wooden Fon whistle. The language of the two songs of this story is **Ayizogbe**. The stepbrother forgets the secret, and he sings ‘I call you, I forgot the secret.’ Thereupon, the trickster answers: ‘You, stupid one. Listen to me, listen to my whistle.’

The performers set the songs apart from the prose narrative by the use of melody and rhyme, as well as the direct speech by the central participant. Choruses specifically show poetic features, such as alliteration and assonance, whether the lines have sense or not (see chapter 15). Songs clearly are the ‘poetic’ narrative that the central participant sings, when he relates the consequences of the incident of the story (Bascom 1965: 3). Furthermore, the rhythm of the song differs audibly from the spoken discourse (see 9.1. Pauses). Guédou confirms just a part of my findings when he affirms that the melody makes the song a fundamentally separate genre (Guédou 1985: 458).

⁶⁶ **é** is a variation of the possessive adjective **cé**, ‘my’; it is used to express the affection of the speaker for an object or a person.

One song is remarkable for its outspoken performance by the storyteller who beat the rhythm with both hands on the left side of her chest (A 3). The performer added this song to a story about the deadly bite of **amanyonu jakpata**, ‘the puff adder’, that is the eleventh sign of **Fa**. The chorus of this song uses the words for funeral drums **adite hungbo hungba**, ‘standing drum, big drum, breaking drum’. The storyteller got very excited during the performance. The singing and the beating come close to the ritual **xò akòn**, ‘to beat the chest’, which is mentioned by Maupoil (Maupoil 1988: 28; see p. 49).

Performers deliver similar stories with or without a song. When they choose to sing a song, either the song or the chorus is similar. This proves that the insertion of a song is an optional item that depends on the performer’s individual choice.

7.5. The supergenre of Fongbe **hwènùxó**

Let us consider those elements of the stories that are relevant in defining the genre of the **hwènùxó**. The performers and the audience often emphasized that the stories are either history or fiction, and refer to what happened in a far past. The dramatic stories deal with the tragic fate of men, while the comic stories deal with the eternal escapes of the trickster who challenges the gods. One may say that both the dramatic and comic stories reflect the Fon belief system. On the other hand, this reminds us of the Fon model of the world that thinks in duality. Fon people perceive history and fiction as two of a kind, one wise and the other one powerful. The duality is a system of two similar entities that stems from the past.

One of the main features of the stories is that they depict supernatural beings or events that involve the belief system of the Fon people. The religious pantheon plays a crucial role in the stories. The central participant of the dramatic stories symbolizes the power of the far away goddess **Mǎwǔ** ‘Moon’ who incarnates the guardian spirit **Sé** and the **Fa** divination. The diviner is the intermediary between the guardian spirit and the object or being that belongs to the earthly world of **hwènùxó**. The trickster is the central participant of the comic stories; he is ‘the big shadow’ who has no name, no face and no figure, but the performers call him names by adding epithets and by creating epitomes (see 14.1.). In the comic stories **yèxó**, the trickster is the central participant that challenges **Dada Ségbó** ‘Great Spirit’ who is a higher and older god.

The stories are about the Fon gods who change temporarily into human beings or animals, and who allegorically incarnate high or specific positions in human society. The gods are the agents of the stories, and hence they have no name, no figure and no face. On the other hand, the gods are recognisable, for the agents have functions that refer to a specific sign of **Fa**, and a specific god. Recall that Fon people are

reticent to say aloud the names of the gods or human beings. They prefer to address people and gods in their status, or they use the names that stem from the **Sé**-initiation (see 5.5).

Let us consider an example in one of the editions of ‘The day to thresh the millet’. The household is about to start the threshing of the millet, and they all think that the king will be humiliated for his marrying a one-armed girl. Before the threshing starts, the obligatory libations to the god in question take place.

ée [0,91]

CI

‘when’

azǎn ǎ so-gbè nùgbó é ǎ [2,12] [cliff hanger]

day DEF millet-GEN.day truth RES TOP_{CL}

‘when the day of the ceremony of the millet arrived indeed’

yě bé akpakpo [1,05]

3PL collect threshing.flail

‘they picked up the threshing flails’

dè li xiyá [1,32]

be millet leave.to.dry

‘meant for the dried millet’

bo yè bé akpakpo [1,77]

CJss 3PL gather threshing.flail

‘and they picked up the threshing flails’

kɔn ny’ayĩ [0,86]

pour throw.on-ground

‘pouring libations on the ground’

mɛ-ta mɛ-ta [0,59]

god-GEN.head god-GEN.head

‘to the king of the gods, to the king of the gods’ [A 4: 127-133]

The word **mɛ** means ‘person’, but has also the meaning of ‘god’. Fon people never mention the name of the god **Sakpata** who is the god of the rain and smallpox, but also the king of the hole, that is the truth. The hole in a wall and the harvest of millet are the paraphernalia of the central participant, which play a decisive role in the Abomey 4 story (see appendix 2).

Human beings become animals and vice versa, but neither human beings nor animals are able to change into gods. The song by the central participant often explains the morality of the story. The performers carefully indicate the end of the story with clauses such as ‘That is why one does not repay evil for evil’ (AC 5), or ‘My **hwènùxó** ends here, there you are!’ (AC 4), and ‘I break off my **hwènùxó** against the top of my little toe’ (AC 19).

In the view of an outsider, the **hwènùxó** may call to mind the Ancient Greek myths, and the Old Testament of the Bible. Greek myths were part of religion in ancient Greece. On the other hand, the Old Testament provides us with many interdictions and prophecies. Myths have meaningful elements that tally with the elements that I discussed in the above (Armstrong 2005). The oracle of Delphi and the prophecies in the Old Testament resemble the **Fa** divination, for they are part of a belief system, which trusts the prophet. The God in the Old Testament has three names of which one must not be spoken. This reminds us of the Fon usage to avoid saying someone’s name, or the inhibition to speak **Sakpata**’s name. Let us consider the basic meaning of the Greek **μῦθος** that is ‘speech’ in the sense of ‘spoken language’. It also means ‘message’, ‘story’ and ‘myth’, ‘fable’ and ‘proverb’. The Greek **λόγος** means ‘story’ and ‘fable’ (Thiel and Den Boer 1961). The distinction shows that myth is religious prose, and that a story is fictitious prose. It becomes obvious that this discussion does not help much to understand the performers’ supergenre **hwènùxó**.

Let us also recall the studies of Guédou who considered the genre **hwènùxó** the words of the Elders, that is an indigenous Fon genre that he defined as long educational stories that give advices for life. He considered the **hwènùxó** the narrative of an event in the past. In his view, the dramatic stories are about human beings, and the comic stories are about beings that do not exist, and that never existed (see p. 30).

Let us get down to basics and return to the underlying principle of duality that I discussed earlier (see 1.2., 1.3., and 5.4.). The principle of duality was crucial in the institutions of the Kingdom. The principle of duality was still crucial in the gods that the Fon people of the rural areas worshipped in 1976. Duality defines also the pair of agents that the performer stages as a function or a status. The contrastive functionality of the agents is basic. The duality conveys power and the lack of power. However, the end of the story shows that the powerful Agent B is the culprit. Thanks to the supernatural help from the central participant, Agent A is no longer a victim as long as it lasts! The distinction between dramatic stories and comic stories is a dichotomy that accounts for the principle of duality. This distinction is systematic: dramatic stories report inhibitions, comic stories tell sacrileges. Therefore, in the view of the performers, both types of stories fit in the same indigenous genre, the supergenre **hwènùxó**.

7.6. Discussion of previous publications about the genre

Verbal art from Benin was subject of several publications. Let us go back to these publications to find out whether they considered that Fongbe stories consist of myths about gods, and tales or legends about human beings or animals. Note that previous publications described the genre by using translated versions of the stories, which were based on the renderings and summaries that an interpreter gave during the storytelling. There are no recorded versions publicly available (Le Hérissé 1911, Herskovits and Herskovits 1970, Maupoil 1988, and Guédou 1985). Guédou published one transcription, and Konrad published several transcriptions of the original edition (Konrad 1994). The corpus of the Herskovitses differs widely from the stories that Le Hérissé and Maupoil published. It is also hard to link his corpus to the stories of the corpus.

Both Le Hérissé and Maupoil agreed that the Fongbe stories of their corpora are myths and legends. In their view, stories about gods are myths, and stories about human beings and animals are legends. Note that the French word ‘légende’ has a different connotation from the English ‘legend’. The English ‘legend’ means a folktale, a fictitious story. The French ‘légende’ has also the meaning of ‘myth’, and indicates the history of the life of a saint that a priest tells in the church to edify the believers.

One of the subgenres described by Guédou is worth considering, that is the **xèxó** ‘words of the birds’, fables about animals. The subgenre **xèxó** does not correspond at all to the subgenre that Herskovits called ‘heho’: fables about animals widely differ from the secular or non-religious tales that Herskovits defined in seven subclasses, amongst which divination and hunter stories, as well as ‘Enfant terrible’ and Yo stories (see also p. 28). In chapter 5, I discussed the important role of the **Fa** divination in these stories that according to Herskovits are not religious, and about which he remarked the following:

“The tales falling within the category of ‘heho’ contrast with the ‘hwenoho’ in that they permit the teller greater latitude in interpretation, in joining incidents from several stories, and in elaborating a single incident to comment on a currently apt parallel.” (Herskovits and Herskovits 1970: 23).⁶⁷

This quotation shows that Herskovits definitely contradicted the French descriptions of Fongbe storytelling. However, it is amazing that the quote correctly expresses ‘the thing’ that the performers of the corpus do in the performance of **hwènùxó**. Moreover, some of the elements in the Herskovitses renderings of stories are

⁶⁷ Pelton copied the distinction made by Herskovits mentioning that the Fon and the other ‘nonliterate peoples’ distinguish between a form of ‘sacred history’ and a ‘literature of the imagination’ (Pelton 1980: 19).

recognizable. I also see a resemblance when it comes to his remarks about the use of similar elements or plots in different stories by the storytellers.

