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Author: Aalders Grool, Marjolijn Cornelia

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8. Conclusions on the nature of the stories

The stories of the corpus are all set in the surroundings that are familiar to the performers and the audience. This world consists of the Fongbe dwelling, and the market in a nearby village. This world consists also of **dǔn**, 'the supernatural world'. Performers refer to **dǔn** by mentioning religious devices and by dropping hints about the symbols or appearances of the gods and the ancestors.

The stories are well known and have their roots in society. They show many references to the Kingdom and the two major pantheons and their cults. The nature of the stories is religious, and belongs to the Fon belief system. A great number of stories refer to the important role of divination. The stories reflect the diviner's devices that are important in the Fon society. It means that the stories often have an underlying meaning that is only understandable if one knows the meaning of the symbols that are used. The performers say that the stories relate to events that happened in the distant past and to imaginary events that might have happened.

The central participant is the only character of the story, for the performer depicts him as a sentient being (see 5.2.). The central participant is the star actor of the story who acts as the problem solver. The central participant of a dramatic story is an object that often is the temporary abode of a god. He is either a personal object or the transformation of a deity. The central participant relates to the personnel guardian spirit **Sé**, whose cult the **bokónǎ** 'diviner' worships. He uses the religious devices that are associated with the **Fa** divination and its rituals and symbols. The Fon people consider the central participant as a being with divine power. Performers only provide us with his properties, but not with his looks. The trickster **Yǔgbó** is the central participant in seven out of nine comic stories.

The stories stage also a pair of agents. Their role in the stories is accessory; they are props that process the story. There is a good agent A, and a bad agent B, who are like two sides of a coin. They both have the properties to play the appropriate role. The important feature of the agents is the duality that embodies the divine principle of duality. This principle stems from the gods that the Fon people in the rural areas worship, and the dualistic organisation of the former Kingdom. The properties of the agents can refer to one of the 256 **Fa**. Agents have neither looks, nor ideas. They frequently have no personal name; they are a function or a status in the story. Agents are either functional agents or common agents. A number of agents have the powerful properties of one of the gods. The common agents are artisans like the blacksmith, or the costermonger who sells her goods at the market.

The background of the stories reflects two of the Dahomean pantheons. Religious devices, gods and ancestors are part of the plot. Gods can change into human beings or animals. Human beings can change into animals and vice versa. Human beings can never change into gods. Notice that Fon people are reticent about speaking the

names of their gods. They address people and gods in their status. The numerous religious devices used by the agents also refer to the gods of the pantheon. The actions of the agents give insight in the existing power relations in society. The divination of the oracle **Fa** plays a crucial role in the stories of the corpus. The involvement of **Fa** is double: **Fa** structures the story by the divination that supports the good agent; and secondly **Fa** changes the course of the story by helping to reveal the culprit of the incident.

The Fongbe **hwènùxó** has three main topics: power, conflicts and taboos.

The topic of power pictures the divine power of the gods, and the functional power of the powerful of the earth, the kings and the chiefs. The power topic occurs in stories about divine power or the power of the powerful, the kings and the chiefs. These stories end with the loss of power by the culprit, who is sent into exile or into death. The second topic is about conflicts of abundance, food and sex or the lack of one of these. These stories also end with the penalty of the culprit who must die or is sent into exile. The third topic concerns the sacral duties and the violation of taboos. The violation of taboos and the duties to sacrifice leads also to a penalty; that is to lose all one's possessions for good, which is a great personal sacrifice. The comic trickster stories elaborate the topic of power on his common practice of deceit and deception. Comic stories end with the penalty of an innocent being that dares to thwart the trickster. The trickster may lose the game, but he always will survive and continue to entertain us.

Twenty-three songs **hàn** are inserted in 19 stories of the corpus. The central participant is the singer. Songs are an elaboration of the story at the denouement. They reveal the morale to the audience in order to share the wisdom of the Elders. Songs convey the violation of an inhibition or the exposition of the violator. The performer sets the song apart from the narrative by using melody and rhyme such as alliteration and assonance, as well as by making the central participant speak direct speech.

The corpus shows two major subgenres: the dramatic **hwènùxó**, a narrative about the fate of human life, and the comic **yèxó**, a narrative that tells trickster stories, especially about the trickster **Ỳgbó**. Some comic trickster stories stage a different central participant. Both dramatic and comic stories refer to one of the 256 maxims of **Fa**. Finally, the song **hàn**, a genre in its own right, is a poetic narrative that is found in both subgenres.

The subgenre **hwènùxó** also involves more kinds of dramatic stories (Guédou 1985). However, the corpus has only a few of these, which does not facilitate a thorough analysis. The corpus also shows three **tàn** 'history of the clan', and one **núbàsó** 'dilemma tale'. Furthermore, the corpus has two 'amorous' stories.

In general, the majority of the previous publications on Dahomean storytelling were inclined to consider the stories to belong to a mythical genre that conveyed educational lessons. The performers of the corpus affirmed that the **hwènùxó** were true, and happened in a remote time. Considering all the arguments mentioned in this chapter, I consider the genre **hwènùxó** an indigenous performed genre that consists of dramatic and comic stories about gods, human beings and animals. The genre also includes songs that may accompany the stories. My working hypothesis is confirmed: **hwènùxó** is part of the verbal art of West Africa. **Hwènùxó** is an indigenous performed genre from the Fon of Benin.

