A new approach to the classification of African oral texts

Many researchers in oral literature have attempted to classify oral texts into well-defined genres. From Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, who were the very first, followed by Vladimir Propp, Alan Dundes, Denise Paulme, Samuel-Marc Belinga, Véronica Görög, Jean Derive to name but a few. They have endeavoured to identify tales and their various sub-categories, songs, myths, epic narratives and other oral genres. The result of their research is a classical classification based on the content of the oral text, its form (or structure), characters, function, the presence or absence of music and which includes tales, myths, legends, epics, songs, initiatory and/or sacred texts, proverbs, slogans and riddles. In the case of African oral literature, the use of oral texts takes into account other additional factors such as time, place and circumstance. Moreover, certain classical terms (for example the tale) do not correspond in every respect to the conception of these genres in the African milieu. For all these reasons, I have examined anew the different oral genres in the African context and propose that these texts be divided into five main categories.

Key words: oral literature, oral genres, oral texts, discourse, utterances, games of jest.

The work of Antti Aarne on the classification of fabulous tales, followed up and developed by that of Stith Thompson, are primary points of reference in this branch of oral literature research. Indeed, their research led to the identification of various genres (tales, myths, legends, songs …) on which others have based their research in this domain. Mention should be made, among others, of Vladimir Propp, F.V. Equilbecq, Alan Dundes, and so forth. When the focus is African oral literature in particular – as is the case for Jean Cauvin, Généviève Calame-Griaule, Lylian Kesteloot, Denise Paulme, Samuel-Martin Eno Belinga, Niangoran Nboua, Maitre Frédéric Titinga Pacéré, Jean Derive, to mention but a few – it transpires that there are some difficulties in applying precisely the same concepts, the same notions, the same methods, the same groupings of texts, etc. as those used in the Western world. In her work *La mère dévorante* (“The devouring mother”) Denise Paulme (1976: 9) acknowledges that: “the authors [Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson] of this monumental work have used as their starting point mainly tales from Europe and Asia, while their counterparts, at least in Africa, very often become confused, which makes the classification of a tale
under a single heading always arbitrary." And Pierre Monsard (1990: 5) confirms this assertion saying: “It is indeed common to note that in African literature the division into oral genres and types incorporates pell-mell: tales, epics, myths, fables, riddles, poetry of circumstance (marriage, coming out of mourning) […]. There is, in these classifications, a heterogeneous enumeration that can be explained by the descriptive method often used in anthropology and ethnology.”

These difficulties have prompted me to examine rather carefully African oral texts (including texts from my own collection, texts collected by students, and selections from various anthologies), using as a starting point a certain number of observations and criteria in order to implement groupings and further subdivisions. I have thus established a corpus of five main categories, which can accommodate almost all oral texts, those of the classical nomenclature as well as those previously neglected.

The classification of oral texts: the antecedents
In his book Motif-index of Folk Literature. A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk-tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books and Local legends (1955) Stith Thompson bases himself on the work of Antti Aarne and proposes the following classification of tales: “I. Animal Tales; II. Ordinary folk-tales; III. Anecdotes” (see also Paulme 1976: 9). This first division has the advantage of being a pioneering work. He puts tales into compartments, thus proposing a useful base for those doing research into oral texts. But this classification is not really effective, as Paulme (1976: 9) has shown: “the division is purely empirical, with the result that the allocation of a tale to a category always remains an approximation.”

One had to wait for Vladimir Propp before observing a significant advance in knowledge about tales. The work of Vladimir Propp, La morphologie du conte (1928) constitutes an important step and an indispensable tool in oral literature research. It is to him that we owe the notion of function:

Basing himself on the principle that constant values and other variables are found in all tales, Propp endeavoured to distinguish between them and arrived at a major discovery: tales often ascribe the same actions to different characters, what change are the names and characteristics of the characters, what do not change are their actions, the events related. From this essential observation, Propp strove to isolate functions, understanding by this term “the action of a character, defined from the point of view of its meaning in the unfolding of the plot” (Paulme 1976: 20).

Thus functions would prove useful to study tales (and narratives in general) in a methodical, and even a scientific manner.

For the African continent, Samuel-Martin Eno Belinga is a researcher who has done a lot of work in the domain of oral literature. This professor of geology at the
University of Yaoundé (Cameroon), for more than twenty years, is also a “musicologist, poet, essayist and a specialist in oral literature” (Vuarchex 1990: 24). The articles and works he has published bear witness to this. His book *La littérature orale africaine* (“The oral literature of Africa”) is, in his words: “a literary aesthetics. It sets out the principles of a method with the following aims: to define general problems of African oral literature; to specify the methodological steps the thought process must follow to explain an oral text previously collected, transcribed and translated” (Eno Belinga 1978: 6).

Denise Paulme has to her credit many publications, the fruits of numerous research projects undertaken on oral texts (see Paulme 1961, 1966, 1968, 1971). Among her articles and books, *La mère dévorante* concentrates particularly on African tales. In analysing tales of various origins (Ivorian, Guinean, Malian, Senegalese, Togolese) with the aid of Propp’s functions and the works of Alan Dundes, Denise Paulme has succeeded in identifying seven types of tales according to their morphology and narrative structure (order of sequences in relation to the progression of the story); these types being:

- **the ascending type**: its narrative structure can be summarised as a situation of lack at the start, followed by an improvement, resulting in the lack being remedied;
- **the descending type** (opposite of the former): normal situation at the start, followed by a deterioration, ending in a situation of lack;
- **the cyclical type**: it starts from a situation of lack, then undergoes an improvement that results in the lack being remedied; but the story continues with a deterioration leading to a lack once more;
- **the spiralling type**: it can be considered as the ascending type repeated at least once;
- **the mirroring type**: this contains two characters (two main actants) who appear one after the other in the story; the first (the true hero) belongs to the ascending type; the second (false hero) tries to imitate him, but he fails in his effort and belongs to the descending type;
- **the hourglass type**: here one finds two main actors (true hero and false hero) who appear simultaneously in the story; in the course of the action, while the type of the true hero is progressively ascending, that of the false hero on the contrary follows the path of the descending type;
- **the complex type**: several of the above types are present at one and the same time (see Paulme 1976: 23-50; Cauvin 1980: 13).

The above types are of great use in the study of narratives.
The classical nomenclature of oral texts

Just as written literature is divided into several genres, oral literature also has its genres, which are usually tales, myths, legends, epics, initiatory and sacred texts, songs, proverbs, slogans and riddles. Some researchers would include in this list fables, chantefables, anecdotes, sayings, et cetera. There are numerous works on these genres (see Görög 1981) which – in my opinion – constitute the classical nomenclature, but it must be admitted that tales take the lion’s share, followed by proverbs, songs; and then epic narratives, myths and legends.

Whereas genres are quite distinct from each other in written literature, the classical nomenclature of oral texts poses some problems for African oral literature in respect of: the names applied to these genres in relation to the terms used in the West, as can be seen in the following quotations: “In fact, what we call oral texts is above all a body of cultural phenomena highlighting the aesthetic use of non-written language. Consequently, the French term genre engenders a certain ambiguity in so far as these cultural phenomena have well defined names in their different cultural milieu” (Obiang 1991: 29); “It can happen that the word conte [tale] does not everywhere encompass the same realities and the various African words translated into French by conte are not necessarily ‘contes’ in the French meaning of the term” (Jean Cauvin quoted by Monsard 1991: 58); “For the Apindji, the word Nkana means tale, legend, proverb” (Monsard 1991: 58).

A second set of problems arise from the grouping of these genres. Paulme (1976: 20) writes that

Finally the classifications established by Africans themselves, always precious for the ethnographer, cannot be of great help here, because they are most often limited to a distinction between “true” stories (myths, historical legends, exemplary, didactic or edifying narratives) and “invented” stories (humorous narratives or animal fables), the borderline between the two genres being revealed as fluid: narratives which have the nature of myths in one society are tales for others and vice versa.8

Or

The concepts expressed by the terms riddle, parable, puzzle, on the one hand, proverb, saying, maxim, adage, on the other, are so closely related that a certain confusion reigns in the use of these terms […] Agblémagnon (1969: 111) […] nevertheless succeeds in explaining the meaning of these words in the way that the Eve use them, but introduces a misunderstanding in what he calls “the modern role of the proverb,” when he terms a proverb what would only be an interjection or a question, such as “If God were not with us?” (Vuarchex 1997: 47).9

A third set of problem arise when scholars do not take certain oral texts into account such as the translated words from certain musical instruments or the words for games of jest exchanged between jesting relatives (see the discussion below).
New proposals
The following proposals for grouping oral texts are based on several criteria that take into account mainly the volume of the text (long or short), its nature (story, prayer or blessing etc.), the musical aspect (presence or absence of music), the mode of expression (text spoken, whether it is sung), the spatio-temporal conditions and so on.

The volume of the text
Some oral texts are long, for example tales, legends, sometimes even very long (the case of epic narratives such as the mvet in Cameroon); on the other hand, others are short, brief (proverbs, slogans …). This disparity in volume has led me to envisage a basic division comprising discourses on the one hand, and utterances on the other. Thus, discourse is defined as a corpus of propos que l’on tient (“words that are spoken”) (Le Nouveau Petit Robert 1993: 654), a body of spoken words constituting a text of a certain substance. Discourse is therefore a solid text, having a certain volume, made up of several words organised into coherent sentences. A priori, it is long, which differentiates it from an utterance, which is defined as being “a brief formulation”. In the light of this definition, tales, legends, myths, make up discourse while proverbs, slogans, riddles belong to utterances.

The nature of the text
The nature of an oral text is what it basically is, it is “the essence” of this text. It can therefore be (a) a story, a narrative; we see this in the tale, the myth, the epic …; (b) a prayer addressed to God, to divinities, the ancestors …; this is found in many ceremonies, rites, rituals, etc; (c) an outpouring as in songs; (d) a game (riddles, jokes …); etc.

And how does one discover the nature of the oral text? Eno Belinga answers this question: “The objective form that will determine, in this manner, the nature of the oral text will therefore be, according to the case in point: a description; a narration; an explanation; an outpouring; […] a combination of the preceding different natures” (Eno Belinga 1978: 68).

On the basis of the nature of the text, I am going to call a discourse that narrates a story narrative discourse (e.g. epics) and a discourse that does not relate a story non-narrative discourse (e.g. a prayer). When the discourse is narrative, the story related can be predominantly fictional (imaginary) or it can be based on real content. Non-narrative discourses are naturally based on real content for they express mainly the concerns of those who pronounce these discourses.

The mode of expression used
The text (discourse or utterance) can be exclusively said: this is the spoken mode (tales, riddles). The text can be exclusively sung: this is the sung mode; music is then used
(various songs). The text can also use both modes together, alternately: the *spoken and sung mode* (epics, *mvet*, chantefables).

**Functions**
The oral text fulfils various functions. The most important functions are the following: (a) education through all the lessons and morals emanating from tales, myths, proverbs, etc.; (b) pleasure derived from all the amusement and relaxation provided by tales, riddles ...; (c) social cohesion brought about by the coming together of people for sessions of tales, songs performed by groups, etc; (d) “catharsis”: one likes to see the baddies – “one’s enemies” – punished, chastised, humiliated; then one feels “avenged” for evils suffered in society through injustice or powerlessness. To these cardinal functions can be added those concerned with things sacred (everything that deals with religious practices, beliefs, rituals) and those that encourage effort and those that support social activities.

**The intervention of musical instruments called “talking” instruments**
In Africa, there are musical instruments that are supposed to reproduce words in accordance with a codification of sounds (or notes) known to initiates, for example drums, tom-toms, *balafons* (African xylophones). “In Black Africa, there are talking drums. They are called this because they imitate the human voice and, like man, their discourse is a source of knowledge and they themselves, an important element in the conservation of this knowledge” (Bouah 1987: 80-81). This codified language can be translated or interpreted into words by initiates in this art; this is what some researchers call *le langage tambourine* (“drumming language”) (Bouah 1987: 80-81; Pacéré 1990).

**Spatio-temporal conditions**
The time and place that an oral text is used also constitute distinctive elements: a tale is usually told at night, when people stay up late; a prayer is said before the image of a divinity, on a certain hill, under a certain tree, at dawn, at nightfall, etc: “In Gabon, oral literature can be produced during the day (lullabies for instance), or at night (tale). However, some genres can be produced in daytime or night-time (the epic of the *mvet*) [...]” (Vuarchex 1991: 28).

**Different categories of oral texts**
By combining all the elements of the criteria mentioned above and taking into account comments on the non-integration of certain oral texts into oral literature, I get five main categories of oral texts, which are: narrative discourses, non-narrative discourses, utterances, “words” of musical instruments, and lastly, words of games of jest.
Narrative discourses

Narrative discourses are those that relate a story in which actants (human characters, animals, spirits, God, vegetable or mineral beings, etc.) intervene, each according to the role s/he plays or the “function” (as Propp would say) s/he fills. There are several possible configurations of the story narrated: it can be

- predominantly fictional like that found for the most part in animal adventures (e.g. the hare, the hyena and other animals); it can on the contrary be constructed around a real, authentic or historical fact (be careful: this does not mean that the story is real in every aspect) as epics, legends make one see it;
- quite long, long or even very long; this depends on the genre (the epic in comparison with the tale) and on the narrator (the latter can combine several narratives into one single narrative; he can repeat one or more sequences that proved very interesting to the listeners, etc);
- delivered solely in the spoken mode, solely in the sung mode, or in both modes together, one after the other;
- used only in the context of a ceremony (initiations, funerals, marriages ...).

On the basis of these configurations, narrative discourses can be subdivided into

- *spoken fictional narrative discourses*: these are essentially tales, usually told at night;
- *sung narrative discourses*: these are songs in which a story can be perceived; some are predominantly fictional (e.g. tales the whole of which are sung, without any spoken sequences); others are based on real content (e.g. songs that denounce evil actions through a story); finally others are used for ceremonies;
- *narrative discourses both spoken and sung*: these are types of discourse in which reality, poetry and actions mingle harmoniously with the supernatural, both in the narrative and the words. If the story related is very long, we have to do with an epic narrative of the *mvet* genre. Eno Belinga (1990: 25) has this to say about the latter:

  In the *mvet*, one finds real actors and fictional actors. The real actors are the following: the epic poet (*mbômôvet*), his percussion musicians and choristers. On the other hand, in the plot of the narrative, the following characters come from fiction, or legend: God the creator and the first ancestors; the sovereign Akoma Mba, the people of his court, his army and his empire; but also the winged creatures that are used especially as announcers of day-break, or messengers of light.

- If the story is moderately long, we have a *chantefable* (a tale in which the narrator uses spoken sequences alternated with songs).
Non-narrative discourses

Non-narrative discourses do not tell a story; they are therefore not narratives, but the totality of their words constitutes a text of a certain volume, solid and coherent. The fictional part is nearly non-existent for their content centres on the real; they are impregnated with everyday life. These discourses are divided into three main sub-groups:

• everyday non-narrative discourses more or less stereotype in form enabling communication between people (greetings for example) and the teaching of certain techniques or “ways of doing things” (like recipes); they use the spoken mode more than the sung mode;
• non-narrative discourses that generally accompany various human activities, thus serving as “supports” for the effort supplied; here it is the sung mode that prevails;
• non-narrative discourses used only in the context of the various ceremonies carried out within a community; they are spoken or sung (prayers, words pronounced for animal sacrifices …).

Utterances

Utterances are quite short expressions generally in a stereotype form that have the value of a maxim, or that serve as praises, or are used finally to create “word play”. With reference to the distinction made above, and in the context of this categorisation of oral texts, an utterance is not a discourse. There are three significant types of utterances:

• sententious utterances that express, tell a truth (and not the truth) based on the experience, observation and evidence of a given social group. They are in very close correlation with common sense and popular wisdom. They comprise proverbs, maxims, sayings, etc;
• laudatory utterances – commonly called mottos or slogans – that serve to laud, boast or sing the praises of a person, group of people, country, etc. Moreover, they are used to galvanise or encourage the receiver in order to sustain his/her fervour and “stimulate” him/her in the action s/he is pursuing; in certain cases also, they serve to identify the receiver, playing the role of a name. This is why the laudatory utterance is the distinctive feature (ownership) of a person (group of people, country …) whose desired attributes, tastes, habits or ideal it expresses;
• “word play”: conceived like verbal games of an enigmatic nature, they make one guess; they have a “binomial” “question-answer” structure such as are found in riddles. Two persons or groups take part in this game and vie with each other in intelligence and imagination to find the right answers. These verbal games can also be language subtleties aimed at hiding what is being said from a third person (often about that person).
The “words” of musical instruments
The “words” of musical instruments are defined as words translated from the sounds of notes made by musical instruments called “talking” instruments (drum, tom-tom, *balafon*, *sanza*, musical bow, *mvet*, etc.). It is essential to note that, on this level, it is not a question of considering the musical notes as elements of oral literature, but as words that result – by translation – from these sounds. And for this, it is usually necessary to have the aid of an initiate in the language of the instrument in question in order to understand – in a human language – what is being said. The subdivisions of this category of discourse could be based on the type of instrument used, but far more pertinent criteria are possible if further research is carried out on this subject.

The words of games of jest
The words of games of jest are those uttered in the course of a verbal exchange in the form of a game between “jesting relations”. Indeed the “game of jest” (also called “jesting relationship”) is an entertainment conducted by two social groups (clans, ethnic groups, villages, in-laws …), in which the competitors indulge in a singular rivalry: that of heaping on their opponents ignominious insults and threats of all kinds, endeavouring to humiliate, deride and dominate them by their eloquence. However, this whole pitched battle, all this hostile verbal fury is just a performance and pure jest: all without real animosity and ending in laughter and good humour. It is my opinion that all oral texts can be classified – each according to its nature and characteristics – in one or other of the categories expounded above.

Conclusion
Oral African literature – it is usually claimed – is a vast and changeable sphere. Vast because, using the spoken word as the essential vehicle of the values expressed, it “touches the whole of society in every aspect” (Kam 2002: 34); changeable because this popular literature, very close to the communities that give life to it and which it often serves to cement, adopts different aspects from one country to the next, from one region to another. Therefore, it is not easy to work in such a field if the various components are not well defined from the start to avoid problems of understanding. In this article, I have used quotations from various researchers to show that a certain malaise has existed – a difficulty encountered on several occasions – regarding the use of terms and the classification of oral texts as applied to African oral literature. This feeling of uneasiness can be seen in what researchers have called a “confusion of terms”, “ambiguity in genres”, etc. Encouraged by these arguments and convinced of the need to find a classification of oral texts that could be functional, i.e. that would make it possible to clearly identify every oral text. I have proposed five main categories of texts in which practically all types of oral texts can be accommodated, includ-
ing those not mentioned in the classical nomenclature. Indeed, it is my opinion that, in Africa, the “words” of musical instruments and the words of games of jest must have their place in oral literature.

And to conclude, I wish to state categorically that oral literature in its entirety – including all the types of oral texts mentioned here – is not about to disappear from the African continent as certain people would have us believe: “Presently, we are witnessing a total decline and an imminent disappearance of oral literature. It was doomed, together with the traditional way of life that produced it, from the very first day of European occupation” (Ngijol-Ngijol in Vuarchex 1989: 24). Certainly, the modern urban environment has dealt some severe blows to the use of certain oral texts (e.g. less nights spent relating tales), as it has done moreover to all traditional customs, values and practices; but this does not mean that all oral texts are going to disappear: proverbs, prayers (addressed to God and to supernatural powers), songs performed on the occasion of ceremonies of marriage, funerals, and so on still have a bright future.

Appendices: Illustrative texts

1. **Spoken fictional narrative discourse**

   **The battle of the animals**

   One day the elephant brought his dabas to the blacksmith to be mended. Now it so happened that the rooster did the same thing at the same time. The blacksmith began mending the rooster’s dabas. The elephant, arriving unexpectedly, rebuked the blacksmith saying: “You must mend my dabas first, for I am stronger than the rooster.”

   “Prove it,” said the blacksmith.

   The elephant proceeded to do his business and made a huge heap.

   “Show this heap to the rooster,” he said. “He won’t need to see anything more. Let him beware if he wants to see me myself!”

   The elephant went off and the blacksmith started mending the elephant’s dabas. At that point, the rooster put in an appearance and became furious on seeing the blacksmith mending the elephant’s dabas: “You must do my dabas first of all, he said, for I am stronger than the elephant!”

   “Prove it,” said the blacksmith. “Here are the elephant’s droppings, which show his size and strength. Do something in turn!”

   The rooster climbed onto the elephant’s heap, scratched it in fury, scattered it and, when there was nothing left, went on scratching, making a hole three metres deep.

   The blacksmith, on seeing this, put aside the elephant’s dabas and took up again those of the rooster. The latter went off after planting in the ground a feather from his tail and adding: ‘Tell the elephant that is one of my eyelashes!’
The elephant appeared and the blacksmith showed him the hole and the eyelash. The elephant lost his temper and said, that being the case, he was going to declare war on the rooster. He sent out a message summoning all the four-legged animals to a general war against the birds. The rooster, having got wind of the affair, sent out in his turn a message calling together all the winged beasts.

On a great plain, the two armies met. The elephant sent out the hyena as a scout: “Go and see the rooster’s column and report to me how big it is.”

The hyena went on ahead and, having seen, returned, but the ostriches ran after him and, catching up with him, they ripped open his stomach with their feet. The hyena managed, however, to return to the army of quadrupeds and, holding up his stomach with two paws, said that the rooster’s column was fearsome and that he had even been struck in the stomach with a spear.

Then the eagle appeared holding in his claws a calabash of ash and, having flown up very high, let it fall on the elephant’s head. The calabash broke, the ash spilt over his head and the female deer thought that the elephant had received a bullet wound and that it was his brain that was spilling out. And so they made haste to run away, taking with them in a general panic the whole army of quadrupeds.

Then the birds and the insects pounced on the four-legged animals that were running away, striking, stinging, pinching, etc. The hornbills picked up the toads that weren’t going fast enough and swallowed them whole. The bees and wasps stung the routed lions and leopards. In short, it was a huge disaster for the four-legged animals.

Since that time, the latter have left the birds in peace and the animals of the ground and those of the air have lived together on good terms. (Tauxier 1985: 33-35)

2. Narrative discourse both spoken and sung (moderate length: chantefable)

Sié and the fish

Once upon a time, a long time ago, there lived with his parents a child whose name was Sié. This child owned a fish (a silured) that he loved very much. Whenever he was given some tô instead of eating it, he would go and give it to the fish that would devour it. Thus the silured grew fatter and fatter, and Sié grew thinner and thinner. His parents noticed this and became worried about his physical state:

“How is it that our son is getting so thin? Yet we give him food to eat! Let’s keep watch over him and see what he does with it.”

Night fell. When the meal was served, Sié took his share of food and went outside. His father got up and followed him at a distance. The child reached a bush, stopped, put his food down on the ground, then crooned in a thin voice:

“Fish, fish, it’s me, Sié;
I have brought you some tô, come and eat it.”

And, before the astonished eyes of the father, an enormous fish emerged from
a hole, swallowed the tô and disappeared back into the ditch he had come from. Then Sié returned slowly home. Back home, the man told his wife what he had seen. They decided to kill the fish.

The next day, Sié’s father sent him to the bush to look after the cattle. And while he was away, the man took some tô and went off to the place where the fish was. When he got there, he put the food down on the ground, and in a hoarse voice, he sang:

“Fish, fish, it’s me, Sié; I have brought you some tô, come and eat it.”

The fish did not come for he knew very well that it was not Sié’s voice. The father sang once more, waited in vain and returned home. At the next meal, when Sié brought his fish food, he noticed the footprints; he recognised them, but did not say anything.

Two days later, his father sent him to market to sell some chickens, took a dish of tô and went off to the bush where the fish was. After having put the food down on the ground, he imitated the thin voice of his son crooning:

“Fish, fish, it’s me, Sié; I have brought you some tô, come and eat it.”

The fish deceived by the voice, came out to eat the tô. Then raising a big axe he had brought with him, the man brought it down on the enormous fish, cutting off its head with a single stroke. A drop of blood spurted out of the fish and went and spattered the face of Sié, who was bargaining over a fowl with a customer at the market. Frightened, guessing what was happening, he grabbed the fowl back from the hesitating customer, and rushed back home. Surprised to see him return so soon, his father asked him: “What, Sié? … you haven’t finished selling the fowls and you’ve already come back? Tell me …”

“Tô! Give-me some tô! I want some tô,” he demanded. They gave him some. He went off running to the place where the fish was. Having arrived, not even taking the time to get his breath back, he launched into his song:

“Fish, fish, it’s me, Sié; I have brought you some tô, come and eat it.”

But alas, the fish no longer came; he sang a second time, then a third, with the same result. In great sorrow, he returned home: “Father, you have taken my fish, give him to me,” he complained.

“We have already eaten your fish, we can no longer give him to you,” answered his parents.

“Reimburse me for him immediately, or I’ll stop the rain,” demanded the child.

“Where will we find such a big fish to repay you? Stop the rain if you can!”

They said it without much conviction for they thought: “How can a kid like that stop the rain?”

Sié did not say anything. He went straight up to heaven where God lives and “caught” the rain. Days went by, markets went by, moons went by: still no rain. A
great drought then descended on the whole of the human, animal and vegetable races: not a single blade of grass grew, nor was a single watering place left. Very soon famine and desolation reigned everywhere. Children died, adults died, animals died, plants dried up. Faced with this catastrophe, the father decided to beg his son’s pardon so that he would let the rain come. He sent Hôï the toad to the child giving him a little carp: “When you get there, you will sing this song,” he said to him:

“Sîé, oh Sîé, jijajjaléré,
Your father said, jijajjaléré,
Take your fish, jijajjaléré,
And let the rain come, jijajjaléré,
Otherwise, jijajjaléré,
People are dying, jijajjaléré,
Animals are dying, jijajjaléré.”

The toad went up to heaven where Sîé was and sang:

“Sîé, oh Sîé, jijajjaléré,
Your father said, jijajjaléré,
Take your fish, jijajjaléré,
And let the rain come, jijajjaléré,
Otherwise, jijajjaléré,
People are dying, jijajjaléré,
Animals are dying, jijajjaléré.”

Sîé saw that the fish was small; he answered the toad in the same fashion:

“Hôï, oh Hôï, jijajjaléré,
Go and tell him, jijajjaléré,
To take back his fish, jijajjaléré,
And give me mine, jijajjaléré,
Otherwise, jijajjaléré,
Men will die, jijajjaléré,
Animals will die, jijajjaléré.”

The toad returned to earth and reported Sîé’s answer to his father. They looked for a fish much bigger than the first one and sent the toad back again. When he arrived at Sîé’s house, he said:

“Sîé, oh Sîé, jijajjaléré,
Your father said, jijajjaléré,
Take your fish, jijajjaléré,
And let the rain come, etc …”
The child saw that the fish offered to him was not as big as his; he refused:

“Hôï, oh Hôï, jijajjaléré,
Go and tell him, jijajjaléré,
To take back his fish, jijajjaléré,
And give me mine, etc …”

The toad went back down to earth and reported Sié’s answer to his father. Meanwhile, children were dying, women were dying, men were dying, animals and plants were dying: the end of the world was imminent. Still, no rain. Sié’s father looked and looked, and finally found a fish as big as his son’s. They quickly sent the toad off once more to Sié with the fish: “Hôï, hurry up, be quick, for men are dying and animals too.”

Hôï ran faster than usual; he arrived out of breath at Sié’s house in heaven and sang:

Sié, oh Sié, jijajjaléré,
Your father said, jijajjaléré,
Take your fish, jijajjaléré,
And let the rain come, jijajjaléré,
Otherwise, jijajjaléré,
People are dying, jijajjaléré,
Animals are dying, jijajjaléré.

Sié saw that the fish was the same size as his. Satisfied, he answered the toad:

Hôï, oh Hôï, jijajjaléré,
Give me my fish, jijajjaléré,
And I will let the rain come, jijajjaléré,
Men will no longer die, jijajjaléré,
Animals will no longer die, jijajjaléré.

Hôï hold out the fish to Sié; he took it and advised him thus:

Hôï, oh Hôï, jijajjaléré,
When you are on your way, jijajjaléré,
Run fast, jijajjaléré,
Otherwise, jijajjaléré,
The rain is going to come, jijajjaléré,
The rain will beat you, jijajjaléré.

Hôï, still out of breath, started on his return journey. He ran and ran and ran. Getting wet in the rain! Not on your life: he detested this above all.

He had already covered half the distance when big clouds shrouded the sky;
immediately everything become dark. Hop! hop! hop! He multiplied his jumps. He still had a quarter of the way to go when, tearing the vault of heaven in two, a bolt of lightning lit up the whole universe, followed by a clap of thunder that shook the whole earth. Already Hôï could see the roofs of the huts, but a series of lightning bolts and thunder claps just like the first forced the toad to seek shelter at the bottom of a big ditch. It’s as well he did, seeing he disliked getting wet, for, at that very moment, big drops of rain crashed heavily upon the ground. A great wind was unleashed; the drops increased: soon, there was nothing but a violent storm pouring out torrents of water over the whole earth.

It rained like this for a whole day. When the rain stopped, the wells, the marigots the ditches and the smallest holes overflowed with water: it was raining everywhere.

The toad who thought he had found a safe refuge to protect himself suddenly found himself surrounded by water; he couldn’t get back to dry land and stayed where he was. This is why toads live in water and remain silent from fear when it rains.

I have put it down where I took it up.

A girl then asked the narrator:
“And Sié, did he stay in heaven forever?”
“Of course not!” replied the narrator. “He came down to earth again after the rain and was reunited with his family.” (Kam 1980: 97-103)

3. Non-narrative discourses (sung)

Song: Kill Tankon
Kill Tankon, your village will be destroyed
Your village will be destroyed. What is it?
If you kill this man, if you kill this man
Your village will be destroyed
Whether it be a boy, whether it be a girl,
How alone a person is!
An orphan in all cases
If you kill this girl, your village will be destroyed
If you kill this girl, your village will be destroyed
Parents, your village will be destroyed
If you kill this girl.
Kill Tankon, your village will be destroyed
If you kill Tankon, your village will be destroyed
What is it?
Your village will be destroyed. (Coulibaly 2005: 121)
4. **Sententious Utterances**

*Proverbs* (from Bonnet 1982):

“First take out the thorn that is in your buttock, before taking out the one that is in your foot” (31);

“The sparrowhawk wants the goat, but does not have the strength to pick it up.” (39)

“The eye of the inquisitive person is hollow.” (44)

“The one who announces to a blind person the death of his/her mother, accompanies him/her to the funeral.” (55)

“If the river bends, let the crocodile bend.” (63)

5. **Laudatory Utterances**

*Mottos* (from Kam 2002):

Naba Wibga, chief of Tougo (Yatenga):

_"nəŋ ɲə pɛlgə kə ɲə wibga zue basa a kəəəba"

fowl female white (negation) see sparrowhawk run let (possessive) children

(A hen, at the sight of a sparrow hawk, does not abandon her chickens.) (384)

Naba Tiraogo, chief of Toesse (Zoulwéoogo):

_"piəbr1ə uambr1ə zaka to vikri lebgə tooo"

rock white appear yard and remove become difficult

(A rock appears in a yard and to remove it becomes difficult.) (385)

Naba Ambga, chief of the Laarlé district (Ouagadougou):

_"təŋə ləgmə yɛsə go tι kombi loaad mɔaŋna"

food add chat and children laugh much

(When children chat with food at hand, they laugh a lot.) (385)

6. **Word play**

*Riddles* (from Kam 2002):

Question: Who does not have a husband and has children during the rainy season?

Answer: It’s maize.

(The stem of the maize plant with its ear looks like a woman carrying her baby on her back.) (399)

Question: Fire has burnt my pants but the waistband remains intact. What is it?

Answer: It’s the path.

(After a bush fire, the paths remain very visible.) (399)
Question: I have a basket; the person who made it does not want it. Someone comes to buy it and does not want it either. Another person accepts it without seeing it. What is it?
Answer: It's a coffin. (400)

Question: A short woman who cooks good rice. What is it?
Answer: The bee.
(Small on short legs, the bee nevertheless makes good honey (good rice)) (402).

Translated by Jill Daugherty

Notes
1. “les auteurs de cette oeuvre monumentale ont travaillé à partir, principalement, des contes d’Europe et d’Asie et leurs contre types, en Afrique au moins, très souvent s’enchevêtront, rendant toujours arbitraire le classement d’un conte sous une seule rubrique” (Paulme 1976: 9).
2. “Il est en effet courant de constater que la répartition des genres et des types oraux en littérature africaine englobe pêle-mêle les contes, les épopées, les mythes, les fables, les devinettes, la poésie de circonstance (mariage, retrait de deuil) […] Il y a dans ces classifications, une énumération hétéroclite qui peut s’expliquer par la méthode descriptive souvent utilisée en anthropologie et en ethnologie” (Monsard 1990: 57).
3. “mais le découpage est purement empirique, si bien que l’attribution d’un conte à une rubrique demeure toujours approximative” (Paulme 1976: 9).
4. “S’appuyant sur le principe qu’on trouve dans tous les contes des valeurs constantes et d’autres variables, Propp s’attache à distinguer les unes des autres et parvient à une découverte capitale : le conte prête souvent les mêmes actions à des personnages différents, ce qui change ce sont les noms et les attributs des personnages, ce qui ne change pas ce sont leurs actions, les événements relatés. A partir de cette observation essentielle, Propp s’est efforcé d’isoler les fonctions, entendant par ce terme ‘l’action d’un personnage, définie du point de vue de sa signification dans le déroulement de l’intrigue’” (Paulme 1976: 20).
5. For example: Découverte des chantefables beti, bulu, fang du sud Cameroun (Klincsieck, 1970); Littérature et musique populaire en Afrique Noire (Cujas, 1965) and Poésies orales (in collaboration with M.F. Minyono Nkpdo), (St. Paul, 1978).
6. “une esthétique littéraire. Il expose les principes d’une méthode ayant pour buts de: définir les problèmes généraux de la littérature orale africaine; préciser les démarches méthodologiques que la réflexion doit suivre pour éclairer un texte oral, prédablement recueilli, transcrit et traduit” (Eno Belinga 1978: 6).
7. “En fait, ce que nous appelons textes oraux est avant tout un ensemble de phénomènes culturels mettant en relief ‘l’usage esthétique du langage non écrit’. Par conséquent, le terme français ‘genre’ engendre une certaine ambiguïté dans la mesure où ces phénomènes culturels portent des noms bien définis dans leurs différents milieux culturels” (Obiang 1991: 29); “Il peut se trouver que le mot ‘conte’ ne recouvre pas partout les mêmes réalités et les différents mots africains traduits en français par ‘conte’ ne sont pas nécessairement des ‘contes’ au sens français du terme” (Jean Cauvin quoted by Monsard 1991: 58); “Chez les Apindji, le mot ‘Nkana’ désigne le conte, la légende, le proverbe” (Monsard 1991: 58).
8. “Enfin les classements établis par les Africains eux-mêmes, toujours précieux pour l’ethnographe, ne peuvent être ici d’un grand secours, car ils se limitent le plus souvent à une distinction entre histoires ‘vraies’ (mythes, légendes historiques, récits exemplaires, didactiques ou édifiants) et ‘inventées’ (récits humoristiques ou fables animales), la frontière entre les deux genres s’avérant floue : des récits qui ont le caractère de mythes dans une société sont des contes pour d’autres et inversement” (Paulme 1976: 20).
9. “Les concepts exprimés par les termes devinette, parabole, énigme d’une part, proverbe, dicton, maxime, sentence de l’autre sont si voisins qu’une certaine confusion règne dans l’emploi de ces vocables et c’est ce que souligne Agblemagnon dans le chapitre IV. Celui-ci réussit néanmoins une clarification du sens de ces mots dans l’usage que les Eve en font, mais introduit un malentendu par ce qu’il nomme ‘le rôle moderne du proverbe’ (Agblemagnon 1969: 111) quand il désigne par proverbe ce qui ne serait qu’une interjection ou une interrogation dans le genre ‘Si Dieu n’était pas avec nous?’” (Vuarchex 1997: 47).

10. “La forme objective qui déterminera, de cette façon, la nature du texte oral sera donc, selon le cas: une description; une narration; une explication; un épanchement; […] un mélange des différentes natures précédents” (Eno Belinga 1978: 68).

11. “En Afrique Noire, il y a des tambours parleurs. S’ils le sont, c’est parce qu’ils imitent la voix de l’homme et comme l’homme, leur discours est une source de connaissances et eux-mêmes, un élément important de conservation de cette connaissance” (Bouah 1987: 80-81).


13. The word mvet has the following multiple meanings, first of all the instrument, then the player, the narrative genre and finally the music (Mve Ondo in Vuarchex 1991: 61).


16. The daba is a ploughing implement similar to the hoe with a semi-circular iron blade.

17. Tô is a porridge of wheat flour, which is the staple food in Burkina; it is eaten with a sauce.

18. Herding cattle is generally the task of children. During the day, they have to take these animals to the bush so that they can graze on the grass. In the evening, they bring them back and shut them in enclosures.

19. Here, the word market means both the place and the day on which the inhabitants of a village come together to sell things to each other. The same term also serves to measure time because the market is held every five days.

20. “Sié o Sié, jijajijaléré, / Fi ja so ou lto, jijajijaléré, / Fa gbo fa toumô, jijajijaléré, E jé hunu ni, jijajijaléré, / Úm mana wa, jijajijaléré, / Umbia wa kio, jijajijaléré.”

21. In Africa, rains are often real storms, heralded by flashes of lightning and claps of thunder.

22. In tropical countries, the marigot is the arm of a river or marshland liable to flooding.

23. The phrase indicates the end of the tale.

24. Here the name refers to a male or female orphan.

25. Naba is a title given to chiefs (of a village, district ...) of the Moosé (or Mossi) of Burkina Faso.

26. Yatenga and Zoulwéogo are regions of Burkina Faso; Ouagadougou is the capital.

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