

# AFRREV IJAH

An International Journal of Arts and Humanities

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Vol. 1 (2), May, 2012:100-111

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print)

ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

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## **Obaraedo: Conformity to Proppian Morphology**

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### **Abstract**

*Various folktales of the Igbo people contain all the thirty-one functions of Propp's Morphology. Although, no one tale is expected to have all the functions, a lot has a pretty number of the functions. One of such tales is Obaraedo. Obaraedo has some motifs which are believably in line with the sequential occurrences of the morphology. Although the motifs are not as many as the thirty-one functions, the motifs to a large extent, have the same chronology as the functions. There are up to seventeen motifs that are similar to the functions. There are some themes that are left out where the tale stops corresponding with the morphology. These themes if found frequently occurring in other tales, would be classified as motifs.*

## Introduction

Sunday Anozie notes that structuralism is relatively new. According to him this area of study started to exist from 1928 when Vladimir Propp published his seminal work on the structure of folktales in Russia. But this work did not reach Europeans until 1958 when the first translation into the English language reached America. Before the translation, two European scholars had made some contributions towards the study of folktales in relationship to structure. One of them is a French, Claude Levi-Strauss, whose is a structural approach to the study of folklore and mythology, published in 1955. And his work was followed by America's Alan Dundes who published pertinent word analysis of American-Indian folklore in 1964 (Structuralism 1).

By the structure of the folktale, F.B.O Akporobaro explains that a tale has a five-structured pattern which includes the opening codes, the setting, the narration, the musical interlude and the conclusion. He is discussing the segments of a folktale. This idea is different from the structure of the folktale in which one follows the occurrences of the motifs in the folktale (114). He later acknowledges the view of the motifiemic occurrences as the atoms of the narrative which he states many authorities have expressed in different theories including Claude Levi-Strauss, A.J. Greimas, Vladimir, Propp, Claude Bremonds and Roland Barthes (442 - 472).

Sunday Anozie acknowledges the usage of some motifs found in folktales in Amos Tutuola's *Palm Wine Drinkard*. The motifs include the hero's arrival, the quest for information, test accomplished, the marriage of the hero, the departure and return of the couple as well as the departure of parents with prodigy (Structure 83).

From all indications we can see that the formular of folktale is well structured and not arbitrary as a result of which tales of different cultures have similar syntagmatic structures that fall in line with the morphology of folktales observed by Vladimir Propp. This has been highly realized by Robert Georges as follows:

Following the lead taken by generative transformationlists in linguistics in recent years, then, I should like to suggest that folktales, like grammatical sentences in any given language, are generated systematically. Though a series of ordered operations, narrative structure containing a finite number of elements arranged in a fixed sequence are

generated. Certain of these narrative patterns are analogous to what grammarians call kernel sentences that is, they are basic patterns which can exist as independent tale (6).

George R. Horner studies the folklore of the Federal Republic of Camerouns and agrees that folktales have a system of sequence with respect to the motifs. He states: "Different folktale systems result in different types of folktales. In this sense, a folktale may be defined as a motifemic-slot-sequence-system-construct (20).

Anne Retel-Laurentin advocates the use of paradigmatic structure in studying African folktales. She is able to find out that there are cases of one and the opposite with respect to characters that are young and old - for an example - and other motifs (32).

For Veronika Gorog, the focus on the structure of the folklore denies one the knowledge of the contents. She believes that structure should not be carried so high at the expense of the contents because contents focus on the semantic implications as well as the thematic classification (61-3).

Gerard Genette defines structuralism in the sense relevant to this work and that is the finding out of new pieces of knowledge underlining the structure of a literary piece of work without adding any extrinsic meanings. He states:

Structuralism method as such is constituted at the very moment when one rediscovers the message in the code uncovered by an analysis of imminent structures and not imposed from the outside by ideological procedure. The movement was not to be long in coming for the existence of the sign, at every level, rests on the connection of form and meaning (66).

Akwanya argues that there are some blocks or identified points in literature which are definite in number which could be found out in the course of studying structure:

The study of the nature of verbal structure we call poetry or more generally literature... and structurally in order to determine its basic elements and establish its form.... But there is a fundamental difference, in that the philosophical approval refers literature to a wider class of phenomena of which it is a sub-type, whereas the type in general

statement involved in the analysis of structure selects and focuses upon a limited range of phenomena to which the statement strictly applies (2).

Mbah and E.E Mbah discuss structuralism as it concerns the morphology of Vladimir Propp which specifically is the business of this piece of work. They express an in-depth knowledge of the thirty-one functions found in folktales of Russia by Propp. In addition, they indicate that Azuonye (1990) studies Obaraedo with respect to the lineal structure (98 -113).

We would carry this study to the level it can help us establish the chronology of motifs in Obaraedo. This is Roland Barthes' idea in stating that structuralism is essentially an activity that is to say the ordered sequence of a certain member of mental operations" (Culler, 1975:20).

From the ideas of all the above authorities, we have seen that structuralism is a critical theory by which we can analyse all works of art including literature, specifically folktales. For our purpose, we are taking a look at the lineal patterns of motifs in the folktale, Obaraedo.

### **Obaraedo Tale**

One woman gave birth to a baby girl she loved so much. Her name is Obaraedo. Because she is the only child of the woman, the woman pampered her a lot. One morning,, when the woman wanted to go to the market place in another town, she gave Obaraedo a tuber of yam and a snail which she would roast for her lunch. She told Obaraedo to first of all roast the tuber of yam before roasting the snail because if she roasted the snail first, it would emit water that would douse the fire by which she would roast the tuber of yam. The woman warned Obaraedo not to go out onto the frontage of their compound in the afternoon because a certain spirit that paraded the frontage of their house attacked anybody he met by making the person lose his or her nose. Obaraedo promised her mother that she would comply.

In the afternoon, she wanted to roast the tuber of yam first as she was instructed but her appetite for the snail prevented her. So she first roasted the snail in order to eat meat before the yam. When the snail was placed on the fire first it started emitting water until it doused the fire completely before it was ready for eating. When she finished eating the meat, she felt greatly hungry. At last she rushed onto the frontage of her compound to fetch firewood for roasting the tuber of yam. As she was fetching firewood, she

saw a certain spirit that lost his nose to a disease. The spirit was coming close to her. When he was close, he told her, "Look, this child jump up". Obaraedo was courageous enough to tell him, "Look this spirit, jump up yourself".

The spirit staggered like a sheep and told her again, "Saa! you child, I asked you to jump up" Obaraedo also told him, "Saa! you spirit I ask you to jump up too". The spirit focused on her face and left her. Obaraedo then fetched firewood and entered their house roasting the tuber of yam. It was then that she noticed that she had lost her nose and was talking nasally like spirits.

When her mother returned, she called her. She answered her `Hoo!' like spirits. When she looked her in the face she found out that her nose was not where it used to be. Her mother cried, "Ewo!, my Lord! What happened to you?" Obaraedo started talking nasally as she sang her plight:

My mother, it's Obaraedo  
My mother, it's Obaraedo  
My mother gave me yam and snail  
Told me to first of all roast the yam on the fire I first roasted the snail  
The water of the snail doused the fire for me I ran out to fetch firewood  
Then I met the *ayaghayagha* spirit  
He asked me to jump up and I asked him to jump up himself  
He asked me to jump up and I asked him to jump up himself

This made the woman to quickly drop her load and rush out looking for her husband. When her husband returned, he asked Obaraedo what her problem was. She started speaking nasally again.

She sang her plight for him:  
My father, it's Obaraedo  
My father, it's Obaraedo  
My mother gave me yam and snail  
Told me to first of all roast the yam on the fire  
I first roasted the snail  
The water of the snail doused the fire for me  
I ran out to fetch firewood  
Then I met the *ayaghayagha* spirit  
He asked me to jump up and I asked him to jump up himself  
He asked me to jump up and I asked him to jump up himself

This angered him a lot. He set out on a journey and crossed seven towns and seven rivers before he met a herbalist that knows about herbs and roots very well. One mid afternoon, the herbalist took Obaraedo to the frontage of their house where she met the spirit that took her nose. When the spirit came out again and saw them he told them: "These people that are here jump up". The herbalist focused his pot of charm on him and the spirit staggered and stood firm. The spirit focused his pot of charm on the herbalist and the herbalist's pot of charm fell from his hand and broke but he did not stagger. The spirit told him again "I asked you to jump up". The herbalist brought out his third pot of charm that was emitting smoke and focused it on the face of the spirit. This time, the spirit staggered before falling like a dead breadfruit tree and died. When this happened, Obaraedo started talking like a human being. Her nose was restored.

Later the herbalist carried the corpse of the spirit to his town. All the children in Obaraedo's town rejoiced greatly because the fear of the spirit was no more in their town. But all of them started to obey their parents. No one among them does what one's parents told one not to do. When children started to do what they are told, the people of the town contributed many things and sent to the herbalist that restored Obaraedo's nose. Their reason was that it was not only Obaraedo and her parents that he solved the problem for. Rather it was everybody that he taught a lesson. (Ugochukwu, Meniru and Oguine, 19-21)

**Comment:** The translation of the above folktale from the Igbo language into English was carefully done to maintain the semantic contents as well as the sequence of the motifs therein. There is no alteration of any sort.

### **Analyses of Motifs**

There are different motifs in Obaraedo which we will study their chronology in comparison with. the sequence of the thirty-one functions of Propp as to show their conformity. They are as follow:

- (1) **Absentation:** The absentation of the mother of Obaraedo is the first motif. This comes after the introductory remarks about Obaraedo and her mother. Obaraedo's mother is set to go to the market place in another town. This is a daily routine and not a special one.
- (2) **Interdiction:** Propp's interdiction is an instruction. This motif is present in the tale. There are two interdictions. The first one is the

instruction of roasting the tuber of yam before roasting the snail otherwise it will emit water that will douse the fire by which she would roast the tuber of yam. The second interdiction was that she (Obaraedo) should not come out onto the frontage of their compound. Her mother told her that a certain spirit that came onto the frontage harmed people by taking away their noses.

- (3) **Violation:** Obaraedo's mother even told her the consequence of violating the interdiction yet she violated them. She had the appetite for the meat of the snail luring her into roasting the snail first and so the water emitted by the snail doused the fire by the time the meat was ready. She ate the meat. But very soon she became hungry and had the need to roast her tuber of yam. She violated the second interdiction by rushing onto the frontage of the house to fetch firewood.
- (4) **Reconnaissance:** The villain (the spirit) easily located the victim. He did not ask anybody how or where to get his victim. When Obaraedo looked around, she found out that the spirit was coming close to her.
- (5) **Delivery:** This is the receiving of information leading to the place the villain is. This does not exist in the tale as the spirit (the villain) did not ask questions before locating his victim.
- (6) **Trickery:** The spirit attempted to trick Obaraedo by asking her to jump. Obaraedo returned the trick to the spirit and it affected him by making him stagger. The spirit repeated the trick but Obaraedo did not fall prey to the commands. She asked him to jump too. So there are double actions of trickery.
- (7) **Complicity:** Obaraedo falls prey by allowing the spirit to see her face. It was then that he focused on her face before going away.
- (8) **Lack:** This function is made a sub-number by Propp. It is a case of one member of the family or another suffering a lack. In this story Obaraedo is lacking her nose. She noticed it when she returned home roasting the tuber of yam. She was talking nasally like spirits.
- (10) **Mediation:** There are double aspects of mediation sang by Obaraedo. One was to her mother and the other one was to her

father. She sang introducing herself to her mother. She sang that her mother gave her a tuber of yam and a snail and instructed her to first of all roast the tuber of yam but she roasted the snail first. According to her the water emitted by the snail doused the fire. And she ran out to fetch firewood when she met the spirit that asked her to jump and she too asked him to jump. She sang that the spirit asked her to jump again and she too asked her to jump up. The mother of Obaraedo quickly dropped her load to look for her husband. When her husband returned, Obaraedo sang the same song to tell him her plight. The situation of Obaraedo angered her father a lot.

- (11) **Counteraction:** This is the decision of the seeker to search for a solution. This is not explicitly stated in the story but there is no how the father of Obaraedo would search for the solution without deciding positively on it. The absence of clear mediation of this motif might be caused by editing.

Mbah and Mbah understand this inexplicit indication and state that it takes place in the stories where the hero is substituted:

Sometimes, it is not expressed in words but by a volitional action, which precedes the search. This moment is characteristic of those tales in which the hero is the seeker-banished, bewitched or vanquished. Substituted heroes and volitional subjects do not demonstrate volitional aspirations towards freedom and in this sort of tales counteraction is lacking. In tales where we have volitional aspiration in which the speaker seeks solution to a problem or freedom or delegates the subjects to do this, the next element is departure (102-3).

- (12) **Departure:** The father of Obaraedo made a departure. He left for a distant place in the course of which he crossed seven towns and seven rivers before he met a herbalist that was knowledgeable in herbs and roots.
- (13) **First Function of the Donor:** This is the test of the hero which he has to pass in order to receive a magical agent. This motif is not in the Obaraedo tale. The herbalist does not need anybody to provide him with a magical agent. He is an expert in magic.

- (14) **Hero's reaction to Test:** Since the hero was not tested, he did not react to any test. This motif is not in the Obaraedo tale.
- (15) **Provision:** This is the motif by which the hero acquires a magical agent. This motif is in the tale. He is said to be employed because of his good knowledge of herbs. In the tale, he used three pots of charm which he used in hypnotising the spirit.
- (16) **Spatial Transference:** The hero moved in space to where he would meet the villain. He did not travel a far distance. He simply took Obaraedo to the frontage of their house where the villain met and attacked her.
- (17) **Struggle:** This motif is the struggle or competition of the hero and the villain. It is in the tale. In this case, the spirit was the first to see the herbalist and Obaraedo. He went to them and started attacking them by his usual style of asking people to jump up. The herbalist countered his attack by focusing his first pot of charm on him. This made him (the spirit) to stagger before standing firm. The spirit focused his own pot of charm on the herbalist and the spirit's pot of charm fell down and broke. The herbalist also staggered before standing firm. The spirit commanded him to jump up again. The herbalist then focused his second pot of charm on the spirit who staggered twice before standing firm. The spirit focused his pot of charm on the herbalist again and his second pot of charm fell and broke but he did not stagger. The spirit once again commanded him to jump up. The herbalist brought out his pot of charm that was emitting smoke and focused it on the face of the spirit. This made the spirit to stagger before falling like a dead breadfruit tree. When he fell down, he died.
- (18) **Branding:** This is the giving of a mark or an injury to the hero. This motif is not in Obaraedo tale.
- (19) **Victory:** There is victory. The herbalist defeated the spirit by casting a spell on him by which he fell down and died.
- (20) **Lack Liquidated:** The lack of Obaraedo's nose is liquidated. When the spirit fell down, Obaraedo's nose was restored. She started talking like a normal human being.

- (21) **Hero's Return:** In this tale, the hero (the herbalist) returns to his homeland. He took the corpse of the spirit home.

### Conclusion

By the linear structure of the motifs we can now see that Obaraedo conforms sequentially. It is matched up one to one and we found out that there is no mistake. The Obaraedo tale has a lineal structure that conforms to the Proppian Morphology beginning from the first one, Absentation, to the twenty-first one, Hero's Return.

Not all the thirty-one functions are expected to occur in a tale because the motifs depend on the contents of the tale. For example, in the case of a damsel or a lad nobody expects a wedding like we can see in the case of the tale concerning the hated wife of the king who transformed and ascended onto the throne with her husband by a wedding. In the above tale, all the functions of Propp are followed sequentially and those that are absent are earmarked. They include (5) Delivery (12) First Function of the Donor and (17) Branding.

It is important to remark that there are some archetypal actions that do not fall within Propp's Morphology. They are worthy of mentioning whether they are frequent as to qualify as motifs or not.

They are:

- a. Carrying the corpse of the spirit herbalist home: The morphology of Propp does not include the material, item or anything brought home by the hero as what he won, snatched or received as a gift
- b. Rejoining of Obaraedo's People: With the achievement of the hero in saving the victim, there is joy. The people rejoiced over the restoration of Obaraedo's nose. Once the problem is solved they will be happy.
- c. Change of Behaviour: The children in Obaraedo's town changed their behaviours. From the day the hero killed and took away the spirit, they learnt that disobedience is punished with great loss or inconvenience and so the vice does no pay.

- d. Gratitude: The people of Obaraedo's town showed appreciation to the herbalist. They contributed certain things and sent him to demonstrate their gratitude for what he did which was beneficial to everybody and not only Obaraedo and her parents.

By the conformity of Obaraedo tale to the Proppian Morphology, one can say that the theory is very useful in studying the tales of the Igbo people of Nigeria. This is very necessary in ascertaining the relevance of the morphology as well as carrying the study of the genre further.

The social relevance of the story is that children tend to disobey their parents and seniors and end up in problems as sin depicted by this folktale. The children that disobey end up suffering one problem or the other. Their parents may give them injunctions and may not tell them the consequences of violating them. Like everybody that suffers an ill fate learns from it, the children of the community underwent some social reformation

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