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## Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres

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## Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres

### Abstract

"Was ist eine Sage?" This question, raised by Carl Herman Tillhagen a few years ago,<sup>1</sup> is equally applicable to other folklore genres. The search for the thematic and structural attributes which distinguish one form from another has continuously occupied folklorists who aspire to establish research in this field on a systematic basis. Thus, Alan Dundes states that "the problem...of defining folklore boils down to the task of defining exhaustively all the forms of folklore. Once this has been accomplished, it will be possible to give an enumerative definition of folklore. However, thus far in the illustrious history of the discipline, not so much as one genre has been completely defined."<sup>2</sup>

### Disciplines

Folklore | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

## Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres

Dan Ben-Amos

"Was ist eine Sage?" This question, raised by Carl Herman Tillhagen a few years ago,<sup>1</sup> is equally applicable to other folklore genres. The search for the thematic and structural attributes which distinguish one form from another has continuously occupied folklorists who aspire to establish research in this field on a systematic basis. Thus, Alan Dundes states that "the problem . . . of defining folklore boils down to the task of defining exhaustively all the forms of folklore. Once this has been accomplished, it will be possible to give an enumerative definition of folklore. However, thus far in the illustrious history of the discipline, not so much as one genre has been completely defined."<sup>2</sup>

The blame, however, does not rest so much with the folklorists as with the very incongruity between ethnic genres of oral literature and the analytical categories constructed for their classification. Whereas ethnic genres are cultural modes of communication, analytical categories are models for the organization of texts. Both constitute separate systems which should relate to each other as substantive matter to abstract models. Yet this relationship has not materialized. The basic problem inherent in any analytical scheme for folklore classification is that it must synchronize different folklore communication systems, each with its own internal logical consistency, each based upon distinct socio-historical experiences and cognitive categories. This is methodologically, if not logically, impossible. Yet, as folklorists, we did not heed this incongruity and, in our zeal for scientific methodology, we abandoned the cultural reality and strove to formulate theoretical analytical systems. We attempted to construct logical concepts which would have potential cross-cultural applications and to design tools which would serve as the basis for scholarly discourse, providing it with defined terms of reference and analysis. In the process, however, we transformed traditional genres from cultural categories of communication into scientific concepts. We approached them as if they were not dependent upon cultural expression and perception, but autonomous entities which consisted of exclusive inherent qualities

of their own, as if they were not relative divisions in a totality of an oral tradition, but absolute forms. In other words, we attempted to change folk-taxonomic systems which are cultural bound and vary according to the speakers' cognitive systems into culture-free, analytical, unified, and objective models of folk-literature. The, now admitted, failure almost could have been anticipated.

## I

The scholarly attempts to establish folklore studies on scientific grounds have followed four distinct paths: thematic, holistic, archetypal, and functional, all of which were motivated by the hope of discovering the formula for methodological definitions of genres at the end of each road. Each of these conducts of inquiry aimed at the construction of a valid, objective order of categories of folk-literature. Yet, naturally, the tools, terms, and concepts that emerged were generated by definite theoretics and geared toward distinct sets of problems.

### *The Thematic Approach*

Comparative folklore research concerns itself with the diffusion of themes in different traditions. Consequently, in this framework, genre is a thematic category. The touchstone for such a generic classification of texts is the answer to the question "What is it about?" Legends are about saints, heroes, miracles, and other kinds of supernatural phenomena. *Märchen* are about "humble heroes [who] kill adversaries, succeed to kingdoms and marry princesses."<sup>3</sup> Fables are about plants and animals, and proverbs encapsulate traditional wisdom. Underlying such an approach to folk-literature is the premise that thematic similarity implies universal generic identity. The formal nature of an expression is inherent in its content. Tales about the same themes automatically constitute a single genre. This assumption of direct correlation between subject matter and folkloristic typology does have some significant methodological value. It provides clear clues for the classification of tradition and hence for the comparative examination of texts from different cultures. Yet, at the same time, this premise begets evolutionary and diffusionistic notions about folklore genres which cannot be maintained by the examination of

historical and cultural facts. Some examples could illustrate this point. The *Märchen* is a European form that flourished in literary circles from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Simultaneously and during earlier and later periods, it enjoyed oral circulation among non-literate rural and urban people of this and other continents. Thematically, this genre has its antecedents in oriental and classical literatures; yet to refer to similar subjects in biblical and Greek traditions as examples of the genre *Märchen* is sheer anachronism. Herman Gunkel, *Das Märchen in Alten Testament*, Religionsgeschichtliche Volksbücher, 2nd Series, Die Religion des Alten Testament, Nos. 23-26 (Tübingen, 1921), is a milestone in biblical research. In this book Gunkel emphasized the role of oral tradition in the formulation of the Scriptures and proposed to conceive of many biblical tales not as history, as religion dictates, but as poetic narrations which share themes in common with European and Asian nations. Gunkel, as the Grimm brothers before him,<sup>4</sup> defined *Märchen* as poetic narrations, in contrast with legends which are historical narrations. As far as this definition is concerned, many of his new interpretations of biblical stories as poetry are, no doubt, valid. But the use of the generic term *Märchen* implies a particular literary form which is absent from the Bible.

The thematic approach for generic definition is even more apparent in Herbert Jennings Rose's discussion of the "*Märchen* in Greece and Italy."<sup>5</sup> He simply used a list of folktale themes compiled by Joseph Jacobs in *Handbook for Folk-Lore*<sup>6</sup> and similar subjects singled out from classical literature as examples of ancient Greek and Italian *Märchen*. However, among his examples are such stories as "Cupid and Psyche" or "Beauty and Beast," themes which, although they are indeed part of the European *Märchen* tradition, in Greece belonged to a completely different genre: the comic romance.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the *a priori* assumption of direct correlation between themes and genres has resulted in an anachronistic conception of literary kinds. In other cases, the same premise has suggested genealogical relationships between various forms. For example, historians of literature have outlined the direction of literary development from fable to proverb, or vice versa,<sup>8</sup> from epic<sup>9</sup> and romance,<sup>10</sup> to ballad. Among the ancestors of the later genre,

ballad, are listed lyrical poetry<sup>11</sup> and metrical religious legends.<sup>12</sup> These relationships are based on the assumption that no theme can be the subject of two genres simultaneously, and when such similarity does exist, it reflects a direct historical relationship. Neither of these assumptions is necessarily true. The story of "The King and the Abbott" is a widely found prose narrative.<sup>13</sup> Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson classify it with romantic tales,<sup>14</sup> in Jewish tradition it is a joke,<sup>15</sup> and in English folklore a ballad.<sup>16</sup> No generic relationship necessarily exists between these forms. Similarly, the theme of the ballad "The Maiden Freed from the Gallows" (Child 95) appears in the West Indies in a cante-fable.<sup>17</sup> Although this form provides more background details which are missing from the abrupt balladic description, it does not imply that one genre evolves out of the other, even though here there are closer formal affinities. Moreover, even within the tradition of a single culture the same theme can appear both in prose and in poetry, as for example, the motif of the "singing bone" which reveals the murderer.<sup>18</sup>

The realization of the lack of correspondence between themes and genres led students of folklore to embrace a kind of Crocean esthetics and forgo any systematic order of forms in oral tradition. Thompson considered "useless" the "effort devoted to the establishment of exact terms for the various kinds of folktale,"<sup>19</sup> and went even as far as making a virtue out of this vagueness as "it frequently avoids the necessity of making decisions and often of entering into long debates as to the exact narrative *genre* to which a particular story may belong."<sup>20</sup> Ruth Benedict said flatly "No folktale is generic."<sup>21</sup> This categorical statement reflects Benedict's field research among the Zuni whose "tales," she found, "fall into no clearly distinguishable categories."<sup>22</sup> Consequently, she adapted Croce's esthetics to the study of verbal art among non-literate people and stated: "It is always the tale of one particular people, with one particular livelihood and social organization."<sup>23</sup>

No doubt, thematic classification of folk-literature has had pragmatic value in the promotion of comparative studies; yet its basic principle of direct correlation between themes and genres does not stand, as we have just seen, the test of empirical examination. The premise that thematic similarity implies generic identity may be valid in regard to the oral literature of a single culture within a

definite period, but it is simply incongruent with the facts of folk-literatures of different peoples or of the same society during distinct historical periods.

However, themes are not necessary standards of order. Any number or combination of attributes can serve as the basis for generic distinctions. Moreover, thematic classification itself involves subjective selection and discrimination, which inevitably biases the system. The choice of some themes as essential and the dismissal of others as irrelevant involves either personal, cultural, or theoretical subjective judgments which defy analytical objectivity. Furthermore, since thematic classification of folklore genres involves selective procedures it can only be an incomplete representation of the literary forms themselves. For example, legends about saints and heroes are often classified as separate genres because they differ in regard to the nature of the protagonist. However, this approach ignores a whole range of narrative and content relationships such as prosody, structure, and performance which may or may not contribute to the differentiation between these two genres.

### *The Holistic Approach*

According to the holistic conception of folklore genres, tales and songs, riddles and proverbs are not aggregates of episodes or accidental combinations of metaphors. Rather they are formal and thematic entities which have an organic unity of their own. This unity is the intrinsic ontological reality of any folklore form. It is not dependent on any theoretical orientation or conditioned perception, and it does not change with any analytical shift in point of view. Genres are, hence, subject to structural description in the sense that it is theoretically possible to illustrate how the different elements in these forms relate to each other and constitute distinct unified fields of actions. Since the distinctive unity of each folklore genre is the basic premise of the holistic approach, its principal mode of inquiry is that of discovery rather than of systematization, which is characteristic of the comparative school. Students of folklore who pursue research in this direction purport to discover the existing structure of a verbal message, of which the speaker or singer and their addressees are not necessarily aware. Although they may respond intuitively to any violation of the structural principles

of such a message, they cannot pinpoint the exact source of their frustration. Only the person who has discovered the formal structure of the genre is able to do so.

Of course, it is possible to describe the particular structural properties of folklore genres as they exist on any linguistic level: phonetic, syntactic, and semantic. It is possible to analyse them in terms of sequences of episodes and actions or to construct abstract models of the relations inherent in the genres.<sup>24</sup> Essentially, the holistic approach affirms the ontology of folklore forms and changes the concept of genre from a nominalistic to a realistic entity. A genre is no longer just a label for a relatively similar corpus of themes, but a real form which exists regardless of any interpretation or classification. The holistic conception of folklore genres provides, in other words, for the fulfillment of Von Sydow's demand to build up a "natural system" of traditional forms.<sup>25</sup> Vladimir Propp, who is one of the pioneers in the application of the holistic approach to folklore genres, indeed emulated the classification methods in natural sciences and regarded his own description as a morphology of the folktales. In an analogy with the term "morphology" in botany he considered it "a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole."<sup>26</sup>

Inadvertently, the application of the scientific principles of botany to folklore can exceed its heuristic value and lead to conclusions which are logically and empirically possible in the natural sciences but are incompatible with the very nature of oral literature. For example, if structural similarity between forms is regarded as if it has the same consequences as it does in botany, the inevitable conclusion would be that there is a genealogical relation between two genres. Propp himself probably would not have objected to that conclusion. After all, one of the main purposes of his research was the formulation of a method which will replace Veselovskij's thematic discussions of the history of folklore genres with more objective and accurate methods. He himself conceived of the variant versions of a tale as relating to the basic structural model as "*species to genus*."<sup>27</sup> Other scholars, in partial criticism of Propp, extended these relations in terms of two distinct genres. Archer Taylor demonstrated that the biographical pattern of the mythic hero, as outlined by Hahn, Rank, Lord Raglan, and



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Campbell actually corresponds to the wonderings of the *Märchen* protagonist.<sup>28</sup> Thus, in structural terms, myth and folktale are identical, or at least related to each other genealogically. Lévi-Strauss, who regards the relationship between myth and tales in modalic, not genealogical terms, phrased it more succinctly: "Les contes sont les mythes en miniature."<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, when it takes this direction, structural analysis no longer serves its original purpose of delineation of folklore forms. Instead, it implies a conception of genres based on approximation rather than differentiation. The genealogy of forms rather than their distinctive attributes may become the central question.

Structural analysis of folklore raised still another problem. The shift from a nominalistic to a realistic conception of folklore genres implied in morphological analysis involves the question of the universality of these forms. Are they only structures of local tradition or are they inherent qualities of human creative imagination? Are they part of an ethnic system of folkloric communication or are they intrinsic to any artistic expression and do they transcend cultural boundaries? Propp himself limited his investigation to Russian folktales; and since he analysed only "ordinary tales" (Types 300-749) which are widely spread throughout Europe, it is possible to assume that this structure is common to the European tradition at large. However, Dundes' successful application of the same method and basically the same structural pattern to the oral tradition of the North-American Indians implies the possible universality of this folktale structure.<sup>30</sup> The similarity in narrative forms between cultures as remote as the Slavic and North-American Indian could have taken place either through historical diffusion, population migration, or independent creation. Any of these possibilities points, at the very minimum, to the universal appeal of these forms.

### *The Archetypal Approach*

For folklore genres to be universal categories there must be a convergence of the structural patterns, thematic content, and social usage of each of these genres. If the legend, for example, is to be considered a cross-cultural category, stories about saintly people must follow the same distinct pattern in all traditions. If such universality does exist it means that folklore genres are

ontologically independent of culture and are not subject to variability of social differences. Hence, it is necessary to account for their thematic similarity and formal stability by transcendental, transcultural, universal archetypes. André Jolles' thesis of "einfache Formen" provides, indeed, such a theory of folklore genres.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, these genres are primary verbal formulations (*Sprachgebärden*) of basic mental concerns (*Geistesbeschäftigung*). He postulates that the human mind is preoccupied with the holy, the family, the essence of the universe, the soluble problem, the accumulated experience. It is occupied with the choice between moral principles, the verbal reproductions of facts, the suspension of immoral reality, and the inadequacies of reality. These are basic mental concerns and, theoretically, they exist independent of any verbal expression. The *einfache Formen* constitute the elementary, primary linguistic formulations of these attitudes. Thus, the legend, the *Sage*, the myth, the riddle, the proverb, the *Kasus*, the memorabilia, the *Märchen*, and the joke are the respective verbal representations of the above mental attitudes. The folklore genres are not *about* these subjects, but they themselves, in their totality, are the verbal realization of them. Each form constitutes a holistic entity, a field of network interactions which in its entirety is a representation or a verbal formulation of these mental attitudes. These primary forms serve, in turn, as the genealogical model for the secondary forms, the artistic genres, which appear in written literature. In other words, in a Platonic fashion, the genres of oral tradition are an imitation of mental concerns, and the literary forms constitute a secondary development of them.

Kurt Ranke proposed to view the creative process of the primary forms from a different perspective and to conceive of them not as verbal representations of intellectual concerns but of human emotions.<sup>32</sup> Thus for Ranke, they are not imitations of mental attitudes but manifestations of a creative spiritual force, a psychological *energía* which rises to the level of consciousness. For the mental concerns of Jolles Ranke substitutes a postulation of basic needs of the human soul which are the "ontological archetypes of various genres."<sup>33</sup> Thus, folktales, legend, myth, and jest are the respective functions of needs for a sublimated world of mythical perfection, psychological resignation in the face of human destruction, the religious meditative relations between the present

and the next worlds, and the psychological ability of man to laugh at human things and actions.

Both Jolles and Ranke shift the categorization of oral tradition from the verbal to the intellectual and psychological level, depending upon their respective views. Both of them, however, derive their notions about the nature of the ontological archetypes that generate these genres from the very texts of *Märchen*, legends, jokes, and proverbs themselves. In that way their suggestions involve circularity of reasoning. First, they reduce the existing genres to either intellectual or psychological levels, assuming the existence of distinct categories; and then, they proceed to suggest direct causal generative relationships between the hypothetical system and the folklore forms. Theoretically, the postulation of an existing intellectual or psychological system on the basis of its overt evidence, the verbal expression, is indeed possible; but the argument that these hypothetical categories are the models or the source of the texts, from which they were derived to begin with, involves logical circularity. Jolles and Ranke lack a third dimension in which the two sets of categories which they correlate exist independently of each other. It is necessary to demonstrate that indeed such mental concerns which Jolles postulates and basic psychological needs which Ranke surmises do exist independent of folklore genres.

### *The Functional Approach*

The functional approach to the categorization of oral literature actually has focused upon the relationships between forms of verbal art and existing cultural, psychological, and social needs. Yet the anthropologists who pursued this mode of inquiry were not concerned with the ontology but the phenomenology of folklore kinds. Their distinction of genre is based not upon any intrinsic qualities of oral literary forms, but upon the perception and identification of their attributes by the people themselves. The functional approach is concerned not with what genres are, but with what the members of the society say they are. Thus the taxonomy of verbal art has become actually a categorization of cultural experiences, which are represented in the overt cultural attitudes toward themes and forms. In most cases, these attitudes are represented in the set of relations of belief and non-belief which

has since become the basis for the categorization of formal expressions and for the analytical interpretation of their function in culture. As cultural experiences, such categorizations of oral traditions are unique. There are no two systems which duplicate each other exactly. Hence the construction of a cross cultural analytical model on the basis of a particular cultural system is a contradiction in terms and amounts to mistaking a deductive model for the real ethnic 'taxonomies. William Bascom, who proposed a tripartite system of classification for prose narratives,<sup>34</sup> was quite aware of this inherent discrepancy. Hence, he regarded the defined terms "myth," "legend" and "folktale" only as "analytical concepts which can be meaningfully applied cross culturally even when other systems of 'native categories' are locally recognized."<sup>35</sup> As far as agreement between folklorists is concerned, such an application of clearly defined terms of reference can indeed be meaningful. However, this type of model inevitably falls short of deciphering the ethnic system of folklore categorization whenever it compares an actual cultural experience with an analytical model, a unique phenomenon with a general scheme. When the actual native genres do not agree with the ideal construction, some adjustments are necessary. Thus, for example, when some West African societies have a binary rather than tripartite classification of prose narratives, Bascom suggests that "myth and legend apparently *blend* [my italics] into a single category 'myth-legend'."<sup>36</sup> In making this adjustment Bascom oversteps the limits he himself set for the system he proposed, treating it as if it has an historical-cultural reality and is subject to change. In spite of his constant resort to native terminology, the inherent premise of such a model does not allow for the consideration of the native classification of prose narratives as a complete complex symbolic system.

## II

The frustration felt by comparative folklorists who are struggling to synchronize diversified and incompatible taxonomic systems may often result in statements of desperation such as the declaration by Greenway that "most pre-literate people are quite indiscriminate about their classification," or that the "primitive mind . . . is [characterized by] unwillingness to abstract."<sup>37</sup> Such

pronouncements reflect more the methodological problems of folklore studies than the native powers of perception, distinction, and abstraction. In effect, misconceptions like these arise because of the failure to recognize the differences in function and purpose between analytical and ethnic taxonomies of genres. The former is concerned with the ontology of literary forms. Its ultimate objective is the definition of what a folklore genre is, the description of its literary "mode of existence"<sup>38</sup> in either thematic, morphological, archetypal, or functional terms. Analytical categories of genres have been developed in the context of scholarship and serve its varied research purposes. Native taxonomy, on the other hand, has no external objective. It is a qualitative, subjective system of order. The logical principles which underlie this categorization of oral tradition are those which are meaningful to the members of the group and can guide them in their personal relationships and ritualistic actions. They are reflections of the rules for what can be said, in what situation, in what form, by whom and to whom. When a person in our society retracts himself and says "I was only joking," he actually redirects his words via another genre. Whatever he said violated the rules of regular conversation but is allowed in the genre joke. Hence the incongruity between the analytical and the ethnic systems does not imply that one is more logical, more abstract, or more sophisticated than the other. Any evaluation of that sort is simply irrelevant to ethnic taxonomy. As the grammar of each language is unique and has its own logical consistency, so the native categorization of oral literature is particular and does not need to conform to any analytical delineation of folklore genres.

For the ethnic system of genres constitutes a grammar of folklore, a cultural affirmation of the communication rules which govern the expression of complex messages within the cultural context. It is a self-contained system by which society defines its experiences, creative imagination, and social commentary. It consists of distinct forms, each of which has its particular symbolic connotations and scope of applicable social contexts.

Each genre is characterized by a set of relations between its formal features, thematic domains, and potential social usages. For example, alliteration is a formal phonetic feature of redundancy which may, although not necessarily, appear in proverbs, riddles,

rhymes, and songs,<sup>39</sup> but it is absent from narratives. When occasionally it does appear in tales and legends it occupies a conspicuous position. On the other hand, prose and poetic narratives can accommodate redundancy on a thematic and structural level. The *Märchen* plot as a story which develops from "villainy or a lack, through intermediary functions to marriage"<sup>40</sup> can appear, with some modification, in epics; but in most European traditions it is rarely a subject for proverbs as fables and legends often are. The communication of folklore in society operates on the basis of such a system of distinctions and correlations. The native speaker is sensitive to, though not necessarily conscious of, grammatical rules of his own folklore. The analyst can discover them.<sup>41</sup>

From another perspective, it is possible to regard the ethnic system of genres as a cultural metafolklore. Alan Dundes, who first introduced the term, regarded it mainly as oral literary criticism, as "a folkloristic commentary about folklore genres."<sup>42</sup> As examples he cited proverbs about proverbs, jokes about jokes, the interpretations of expressions by the speakers themselves. However the term "metafolklore" yields itself semantically to a further extension. Metafolklore can be understood to mean the conception a culture has of its own folkloric communication as it is represented in the distinction of forms, the attribution of names to them, and the sense of the social appropriateness of their application in various cultural situations.

The ethnic system of genres is a cognitive correlative of metafolklore, a culturally explicit statement of the conception the speakers have of their expressive forms, formulated in both verbal and behavioral terms. The names of genres are indicative of the attributes people perceive in their verbal art forms. The interpretation of names of genres should not be literal. Such an explanation might point to the etymology of a word but not necessarily to its current meaning. *Märchen* is not simply a short tale, but a complex European narrative form which has a definite thematic domain and stock of characters. The Bini term *umařamwen* means literally "a council of animals."<sup>43</sup> Yet in my own work I found that only one informant applied it strictly to animal tales and regarded its contents as purely fictional. Other people understood by *umařamwen* a tale without songs.<sup>44</sup>

The behavior of folklore performance also has a defining capacity in terms of genres. The time in which a story is told, for example, places it in a particular position in the temporal sequence of the social, economical, and political activities of a group. The Marshallese fairy tale *inoñ* "must be told only at night."<sup>45</sup> There is nothing in the term itself which provides any clue to this behavioral pattern; yet the observation of this rule is strictly adhered to, and thus it becomes a component part of the Marshallese concept *inoñ*. Similarly Melville and Frances Herskovits tell us that the Dahomean "in his classification of narrative . . . identifies two broad categories, the *hwenoho*, literally 'time-old-story,' which he translates variously as history, as traditional history, or as ancient lore and *heho*, the tale. It is a distinction that the youngest story-teller recognizes. It has bearing on culturally defined attitudes toward traditional lore and improvisation, on the one hand, and on priorities in narration, as governed by seniority rights, professional specialization and sexual differentiation of roles, on the other hand."<sup>46</sup>

In the final analysis each society defines its genres by any number or combination of terms. Yet the distinctive attributes which speakers of folklore recognize in their communication can be analytically confined to three levels: prosodic, thematic, and behavioral. The conception of the prosodic nature of an expression is a function of the perception of the relationship between verbal sounds and time; the formulation of the thematic attributes is dependent upon the relationships between actions, actors, or metaphors; and the recognition of the behavioral characteristics derives from the potential social composition of the communicative event. An ethnic definition of a genre may incorporate distinctions made on any or all three levels. A song can differ from a tale in the prosodic contour of the message, the subject matter, and the occasions the society provides for its performance.

Probably the most commonly recognized attribute of speech is its prosodic quality. Franz Boas pointed out that "the two fundamental forms, song and tale, are found among all the people of the world" and hence he suggested that "they must be considered the primary forms of literary activity."<sup>47</sup> For Boas, the notion of primacy, in this context, refers to the position these two forms have in the development of literary creativity. Rhythmic forms constitute the lowest common denominator of world

literatures and hence must be basic to any verbal expression. However, it is possible to conceive of the primacy of prose and poetry not in evolutionary but in perceptual terms, in relationship to the immediacy or latency of recognition. The existence or absence of metric sub-structure of a message is the quality which is first recognized in any communicative event and hence serves as the primary and most inclusive attribute for the categorization of oral tradition. Consequently, prose and poetry constitute a binary set in which the metric sub-structure is the crucial attribute which differentiates between these two major divisions. It serves as the definitive feature which polarizes any verbal communication and does not provide any possible intermediary positions. A message is either rhythmic or not. However, within the category of poetry, speakers may be able to perceive several patterns of verbal metrical redundancy which they would recognize as qualitatively different genres. For example, Andrezejwski and Lewis note that "the Somali classify their poems into various distinct types each of which has its own specific name. It seems that their classification is mainly based on two prosodic factors: the type of tune to which the poem is chanted or sung, and the rhythmic pattern of the words."<sup>48</sup>

The very existence or absence of a metric sub-structure in the verbal message can signify the conception the society has of a particular theme or can provide clues as to the narrator's intent. The speaking of prose, for example, associates a message with everyday speech. In spite of the extraordinary events related in a legend, its narration in prose signifies reality and plausibility. However, when the approximation to daily discourse has only an artistic value and the narrator does not seek the credence of his audience, he is likely to preface his tales with cautionary clues such as opening or closing formulae, special vocabulary and phrases inserted in the body of the story, which enable the listeners to grasp the real nature of the message and not to confuse fiction with reality. Thus, among the Marshallese "the fairy tale always begins with the word *kininwante*, which without specific meaning signifies 'this is a fairy tale; it may or may not have happened long ago; it is not to be taken seriously; it is not always supposed to be logical.'<sup>49</sup> Similarly the Ashanti people open their fictional tales with the formula "we don't really mean to say so; we don't really mean to say so."<sup>50</sup> In current American usage the phrase "have you



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heard about . . ." often demarcates the joke from the regular prose speech in which it is inserted.

Similarly, the speaking of poetry signifies the conception the speakers have of their subject-matter or the occasion. The usage of metric prosody can have a wide range of significance, varying from religious sanctions to magical power to sheer play, depending upon the circumstances of delivery. Common, however, to all poetic expression is the deliberate deviation from everyday speech, and with it the departure from the profane, the realistic, or true. This, of course, does not imply that any information which is communicated in a poetic form is ontologically false or intended to be imaginary. Most ballads and epics do contain a nucleus of historical truth in them. Jan Vansina, for example, went so far as to construct a method for the induction of the possible historical truth in African poetic recitations.<sup>51</sup> The ballad "Tom Dooley," which was popular in the United States a few years ago, was based on a local historical incident.<sup>52</sup> However, the delivery of this story in a metric form indicates an intent to affect the audience emotionally and not merely to transmit factual information to them. As a matter of fact, in prose fiction there is a contradiction between the signification of prose speech and the cultural attitude to the subject matter and hence such narration often requires special disclaimers of any truth value. In contrast, since poetic forms signify a departure from reality any intent on the part of the speakers to establish his story as true needs validating statements, such as the opening formulae in broadside ballads which establish the story as a testimony.

In spite of the fact that prose and poetry are mutually exclusive forms of verbal art, the prosodic structure of a single expression, or even of a whole genre, does not have to be metrically uniform. It may include segments of varied prosodic nature. In fact, in Africa, where singing is often an integral part of the storytelling event, there are some peoples who regard the existence or absence of songs interspersed in the prose text as a primary distinctive attribute for the categorization of narratives. Thus Clement Doke informs us that "Lamba folk-lore is classified by the natives in two ways, according to the mode of recitations. First and foremost comes the prose story, called *Icisimikisyo*. The other, which, for want of a better term, is translated as 'Choric Story,' is variously called by the

natives . . . *Ulusimi, Icisimi, Akasimi* and *Akalaŋi*. This is a prose story interspersed with songs."<sup>53</sup>

The Gbaya and the Bini peoples also divide their prose narratives in such a way. Among the Gbaya "the main distinguishing feature between the *tô* and the *lizang* is the song [*gima*]."<sup>54</sup> The Bini, who distinguish between songs, *ihuan*, and tales, categorize the latter in terms of the metric composition of the entire narrative: tales with songs are *okha*, and tales without them are *umaŋamwen*. This kind of classification is by no means universal to cultures in which these two modes of storytelling exist. Other societies may ignore the form of recitation as a distinctive attribute between genres and focus upon other characteristics of their narratives.

The basis for the categorization of verbal art into prose and poetry is the concrete, physiological reality of speech. It is an objective, observable, and verifiable process, the attributes of which are not dependent solely upon the subjective perception of the speakers. Metric speech constitutes an ontological system which is objectively distinct from prose. Although various peoples may draw the demarcation line between the two categories at different points, and boundaries between the two divisions may fluctuate even within a single group, there will always be a substantive distinction between them. In contrast, the ethnic taxonomy of verbal art in terms of its secondary attributes, the thematic and behavioral features, is a phenomenological system. It is a function of the social experience of folkloric communication. Since the speaking of folklore involves a process of exchange of messages which have to be mutually comprehensive to be effective, it must adhere to consistent rules of communication. An ethnic genre must have defining features which signify its potential connotations and clearly distinguish it from other forms of verbal art. This fact of cultural consistency and coherence may enable future discussions of folkloric systems, similar to such studies in other social sciences.

For the time being, any suggestions in this direction must be hypothetical in nature. All the facts which are required for the deciphering of any given system of verbal art are simply not available since previous folklorists sought solutions to other types of problems.

Since the folkloric system in any given culture functions in

society in both thematic and behavioral terms it seems reasonable to assume, at this preliminary stage of our inquiry, that each genre consists of distinctive attributes on both these levels. Furthermore, since an ethnic genre is a part of a whole folkloric system, it must relate to other forms in the same network of communication. Hence these distinctive attributes are, at the same time, also in contrastive relations to the defining features of other genres. Of course such relations are possible only between attributes which share a dimension of relevance. Thus, it is possible to contrast two types of protagonists, two kinds of social situations, and two different narrative endings.

On the basis of the foregoing assumptions it is possible to consider an ethnic genre as a verbal art form which consists of a cluster of thematic and behavioral attributes, and to formulate the relationships between the various elements of the folkloric system in the form of a paradigm.<sup>55</sup>

For illustrative purposes it seems best to quote, at some length, a discussion of folklore genres in which there is an attempt to define the nature of each form in a deductive method, in the light of established notions about the nature of "myth," "legend," and "tale," and then to examine the same genres inductively, in the light of the previous argument. Bascom's description of two prose genres of the Yoruba people of Nigeria will serve that purpose.

The Yoruba recognize two classes of stories: the folktale (*aló*) . . . and the myths, traditions, or "histories" (*itan*). The folktales are ordinarily told for amusement about the fire on moonlight evenings during the season of harmattan. The myths on the other hand are regarded as historically true, and are quoted by old men to settle a difficult point in a serious discussion of ritual or political matters. Both types, however, are recited under the same conditions by the diviners as part of the Ifa verses.

By and large the myths or histories are distinguished by having deities or legendary figures as characters rather than animals, and by explaining or justifying present-day ritual behavior. But as Boas pointed out, because of the ease of substitution of characters and explanatory elements, these distinctions do not make it possible to classify any plot as either myth or a tale in the generic sense. In some verses the deities Ifa and Eshu appear in the role of trickster instead of Tortoise; but there are many others . . . where the characters are animals, and some in which Tortoise himself is the trickster. And in the Ifa verses, the purpose of

both myths and tales is to justify the prediction that is made and to explain to the client why a particular sacrifice is necessary.

It is obvious that these stories are not recited by the diviners simply for the amusement of their clients, and that their function is not limited to providing entertainment or aesthetic satisfaction. They are not non-utilitarian, but have practical application of a type that can be compared to the use of elaborate costumes, carved masks, or highly decorated paraphernalia in religious ceremonies. It is generally accepted that graphic and plastic art in primitive cultures is seldom pure art; in this instance we have a case of applied art in the field of literature. The verbal incantations, the myths, and the songs used as a part of magical and religious ritual can also be cited as examples of "applied" literary art.

While the full significance of this point may not have been previously recognized, it is implicit in the attempts that have been made to distinguish myths from folktales on the basis of whether or not they are employed as a part of ritual. However since both myths and folktales, according to the Yoruba categories, are associated with the ritual of divination, a distinction between them on this basis is no more satisfactory than one based on the type of characters which appear in the plot. The real basis of the Yoruba categories seems to be whether the accounts are to be regarded as fact or fiction.<sup>56</sup>

Thus Bascom carefully describes the characteristics of each of these genres, weighs the evidence one way or another before he categorizes them, and finally in conclusion, he reduces the differences between *itan* and *aló* to the contrast between belief and non-belief. Yet this very evaluation of narratives as truth or fiction is actually not a primary but a secondary formulation of attitudes toward the thematic and behavioral attributes the speakers perceive in the narratives themselves. There is a whole gamut of distinctions between these two genres; and, although the reduction of their differences to just a single set of contrastive attributes may be analytically convenient, it is ethnographically simplistic.

Yet Bascom's own description can serve as a basis for a preliminary formulation of the relations between *itan* and *aló* as two communicative entities within the Yoruba folkloric system. Accordingly, *itan* is a verbal art form which is consistently related to ritual or politics, its narrators are either diviners or old men, it revolves around either deities or human heroes, and is considered as either religious or historical truth. On the other hand *aló* is told for amusement, by any person in the society, its protagonists are often animals, and it is regarded by the Yoruba as fiction. The attributes

of *itan* and *alḡ* relate to each other within the framework of several dimensions. Thus in terms of the social situations in which people narrate the two genres, *itan* relates to *alḡ* as ritual or politics to amusement. The singularity of *itan* in Yoruba folklore is analogous to the distinctions diviners and older men have in this society. Thematically, it is possible to consider, for the time being, only the nature of the protagonist; and, in this context, the contrast between the two genres is equivalent to that between deities and heroes, and animals. In their totality the Yoruba consider *itan* as a true account of historical or religious events whereas *alḡ* is a narration of fictional matters.

On the basis of the cluster of features which co-exist within a single genre and the contrastive attributes on each dimension it is possible to formulate a paradigm of relations between *itan* and *alḡ* as the Yoruba themselves conceive of them. Thus in the Yoruba grammar of folklore:

*itan:alḡ::* ritual/politics:amusement::old men/diviners:any sex and any age::deities/human heroes:animals::religious or historical truth:fiction.

It is possible to rewrite these relations in a table form:

genre dimension	<i>itan</i>	<i>alḡ</i>
situation	ritual/politics	amusement
narrator's status	old men/diviners	any sex/any age
protagonist	deities/heroes	animals
attitude	truth:religious or historical	fiction

Of course, the more extensive the analytical study of the texts is, and the more detailed the observations of its performance and the inquiry into the attitudes are, the closer will these paradigmatic relations between the distinctive attributes of *alḡ* and *itan* reflect the ethnic conception of these two genres. Such details should

include the distinct thematic domains of each genre, their particular formal qualities, and connotative references. It should point to the entire range of social components which constitute the situations in which they are applicable and any other kind of relations which can be induced from the formal expressions in the ethnic genre system.

Bascom's description of the Yoruba genres *aló* and *itan* and the frustrations he encountered in the definitions of the exact distinctions between them illustrate an additional relationship of attributes, that of equivalence. Some generic features are not distinctive, but under certain circumstances they are, borrowing a term from linguistics, in free-variation with each other. That is to say the substitution of one attribute for another does not produce any significant changes in the symbolic value of the verbal form and has equivalent effect. The attributes which are in free-variation with each other are culturally determined. Thus, for example, it is no accident that the deity Eshu is substituted for Tortoise in these narratives; for in Yoruba belief system Eshu is the trickster among the deities,<sup>57</sup> as Tortoise is among the animals, and hence they are found under certain circumstances in free-variation with each other without producing any qualitative changes in the genres themselves.

Similarly, the Ifa diviner has a particular conception of Yoruba tradition which deviates from the generally accepted one. Although diviners do quote from and refer to *aló* as well as *itan* in their divinations, they conceive all narrative traditions as a single category of which the appropriate usage is in the ritualistic situation. As far as they are concerned all tradition has the same symbolic values and hence the same name and they "describe all Ifa narratives as *itan*,"<sup>58</sup> and ignore the generally accepted dichotomy between the two prose genres. Consistent with their conception of these narratives, and in spite of the fact that "the diviners are recognized as knowing more folktales than other individuals . . . they may not use this knowledge for secular purposes." Moreover, "in Ifa it is a professional tabu for diviners to tell folktales (*pa aló*) for amusement, or even to join in singing the songs in the tales when they are being told by someone else."<sup>59</sup> Thus what appeared to be an irreconcilable feature of Yoruba genres from an analytical standpoint in an earlier description later turns out to be consistent with the rules of grammar of folklore as the Yoruba diviner conceives of them.

The set of contrastive attributes represents the structure of relations between the distinct genres in the system of folklore communication. They are contrastive only in their cultural context. There is no inherent opposition between amusement and ritual or politics, as there is no ontological reason for the association of ritual and politics or religion and history as equivalent attributes. Similarly, the clusters of attributes within a single genre have logical consistency within the cultural context. Animals, for example, might be associated with totemism in other societies and would have closer affinity with ritual and social structure than with amusement and fiction as is the case in Yoruba trickster tales. Yet for the Yoruba man who lives in a society in which divine kingship is the dominant religio-political order, these contrasts and associations are sound and valid. They are congruent with the social and religious systematization of his culture. In that sense the analysis of ethnic genres has a diagnostic value as well. Since the cultural conception of the folkloric communicative system is part of the general cultural cognitive reality, it should be methodologically possible to infer from the categorization of folklore some general principles which underlie the taxonomy of the cosmic natural and social universe.

The summation of thematic and behavioral attributes of a genre and its position in the folkloric system are best indicated by the terms people call their expressive forms. The names of genres often reflect their symbolic value in the network of formal communication and their position in the cultural cognitive categories. It signifies the semantic component of the genre in all its manifestations, the basic common denominator that unifies all its attributes in the culture. Thus even expressions which are formally similar have different symbolic meanings in separate ethnic systems of genres. Proverbs, for example, often deviate from the regular syntactic structure of a language, and thus relate to everyday speech in similar manner in different societies. Yet in each culture they have their particular symbolic connotations and communicative value. The Hausa people of Northern Nigeria regard a proverb, *karin magana*, in terms of its application in verbal context,<sup>60</sup> whereas the Jabo of Liberia regard it as "old matter," *da' di kpa*.<sup>61</sup> The proverbs are "first principles" for the Marshallese,<sup>62</sup> and in the biblical Hebrew *mashal*<sup>63</sup> means an exemplary dictum as well as a fable.

\* Not all cultures have an explicit linguistic taxonomy of verbal art beyond the primary prosodic distinction between prose and poetry. This is so in spite of the fact that the people are likely to perceive the thematic and behavioral distinctive attributes of the various genres. In such cases the name of the general category points to the primary attribute which unifies all these different forms in the cultural cognition. The Limba people of Sierra Leone, for example, have a single term for their prose expression—*mbɔrɔ*. According to Ruth Finnegan, who recorded their tales, "the Limba themselves do not make any further clear division. In most dialects the same term is used to cover a wide range of formulations, from 'folktales' in the accepted sense of the word to shorter forms such as riddles and proverbs, as well as what we would normally call historical accounts. None of these classes are strictly differentiated by the Limba."<sup>64</sup> From Finnegan's further discussion it is not quite clear whether the Limba really do not distinguish between the various prose forms or whether the term *mbɔrɔ* is simply a polysemic word which has different meanings in different linguistic and social contexts. However, the Limba people seem to differentiate behaviorally if not overtly verbally between the various forms of *mbɔrɔ*. The speakers talk the shorter forms, which Finnegan compares with proverbs or analogies, in the context of persuasion, argument, oratory and joking. On the other hand, storytellers narrate the longer *mbɔrɔ* forms in the relaxed atmosphere of the evening before retirement.<sup>65</sup> Thus the social behavior of the Limba does indicate that the term *mbɔrɔ*, which seems to be all inclusive, has different meanings and refers to distinct forms on separate occasions.

In any case, although the concept *mbɔrɔ* seems to parallel a somewhat extended notion of the English term "prose narrative," its connotations are completely different. In their categorization, the Limba people are concerned neither with the prose nor with the narrative qualities of its forms. According to Finnegan, the term *mbɔrɔ* is "an integrated one and has two main strands." These are

first the connexion with age and tradition, and secondly the idea of analogical expression . . . . In the first place the word *mbɔrɔ* seems to be connected with the root *bɔrɔ*, old. *Mabɔrɔ ma* are the "old people" usually referring to the dead ancestors, and *bɔrɔ* commonly occurs in various grammatical forms as the ordinary adjective meaning "old" . . . .



Moreover, whatever the linguistic facts about the derivation of the word *mbɔrɔ*, the concept does seem to be closely associated in Limba eyes with the idea of age and tradition . . . . The Limba are conscious of the wisdom and presence of "old people"<sup>66</sup>

In an earlier discussion Finnegan mentioned that "artistic expression and inspiration, whether of singers, storytellers, dancers or drummers, is thought to come from essentially the same source—the dead, 'the old people.'"<sup>67</sup> "The second main connotation of *mbɔrɔ*, apparent in at least the majority of the many usages of the term, is that of a comment or reflection in analogical terms. This is naturally specially clear when *mbɔrɔ* is used to mean metaphor, parable and analogy; but even when *mbɔrɔ* means the more straight forward stories, it seems to suggest this aspect."<sup>68</sup>

The inquiry into the names for genres must extend beyond the limits of etymological interpretation. Historically and geographically the same names may mean different things in the same language in separate periods and distinct regional dialects. Conversely, two different words may acquire the same meanings in different periods. Moreover, with usage, the names may develop a complex semantic structure, for which etymology alone would not account. Hence the study of the ethnic system of genres must combine the cognitive, expressive, and behavioral levels of genres in each culture.

Although the significance of ethnic classifications of folklore has long been recognized, in most cases its actual study was frustrated by the discrepancy between the analytical and the ethnic systems. The preceding discussion was merely an exploratory outline which attempted to point to areas of promise rather than to present conclusive theory and method. However, if folklore communication, allusive and complex as it is, is based upon culturally defined rules, then their discovery is essential. The system of genres is the primary ethnic formulation of such a grammar of folklore.<sup>69</sup>

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## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup>Alan Dundes, "Texture, Text and Context," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, XXVIII (1964), 252.
- <sup>3</sup>Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York, 1946), p. 8.
- <sup>4</sup>Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsche Sagen*, 3rd ed. (Berlin, 1891), p. vii [1st ed. 1816].
- <sup>5</sup>*A Handbook of Greek Mythology Including its Extension to Rome* (New York, 1959), pp. 286-304.
- <sup>6</sup>Joseph Jacobs, "Some Types of Indo-European Folktales," in Charlotte Sophia Burne, *The Handbook of Folk-lore*, new and revised edition (London, 1914), pp. 344-355. This is a revised list of "story radicals" which appeared in S. Baring-Gould, "Household Tales," in William Henderson, *Notes on the Folk Lore of Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (London, 1866), pp. 299-311.
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- <sup>8</sup>Archer Taylor, *The Proverb*, reprint (Hatboro, Pa., 1962) pp. 27-32.
- <sup>9</sup>W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance; Essays on Medieval Literature*, reprint (New York, 1957), pp. 123-132.
- <sup>10</sup>William John Courthope, *A History of English Poetry* (New York, London, 1895), I, 445-468.
- <sup>11</sup>Louise Pound, *Poetic Origins and the Ballad* (New York, 1921), pp. 28, 45-46.
- <sup>12</sup>Julie R. Mackey, *Medieval Metrical Saints' Lives and the Origin of the Ballad* (Unpub. Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1968).
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- <sup>14</sup>*The Types of the Folktale*, second revision, *Folklore Fellows Communications*, No. 184 (Helsinki, 1961), pp. 320-321.
- <sup>15</sup>See Haim Schwarzbaum, *Studies in Jewish and World Folklore* (Berlin, 1968), pp. 115-116, and Dov Noy, *Folktales of Israel* (Chicago, 1963), pp. 94-97.
- <sup>16</sup>Francis J. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston, 1882-1898), No. 45, I, 403-414.
- <sup>17</sup>Elsie Clews Parsons, *Folk-Tales of Andros Island Bahamas*, *Memoirs of the American Folk-Lore Society*, XIII (New York, 1918), 152-154, and Martha Warren Beckwith, "The English Ballad in Jamaica: A Note Upon the Origin of the Ballad Form," *PMLA*, XXXIX (1924), 475-476.

- 18 For references to both prose and poetic forms see Aarne and Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, Type 780 "The Singing Bone," p. 269.
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- 22 *Ibid.*, p. xxx.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- 24 For a brief discussion of the "syntagmatic," sequential, and "paradigmatic" types of structural analysis and their application to folklore, see Alan Dundes, "Introduction to the Second Edition," in Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd ed. (Austin, Texas, 1968), pp. xi-xvii. This article includes a short, valuable bibliography about the various approaches to structural analysis in folklore and related texts. Other essays are included in "Recherches sémiologiques: l'analyse structurale du récit," *Communications* No. 8 (1966). Also of interest are Anne Retel-Laurentin, "Structure et symbolisme: Essai méthodologique pour l'étude des conte africains," *Cahiers d'études africaines*, VIII, 30 [1968], 206-244; Eugenio Donato, "Of Structuralism and Literature," *Modern Language Notes*, LXXXII (1967), 549-574; Dell Hymes, "The 'wife' who 'goes out' like a man: Reinterpretation of a Clackamas Chinook Myth," *Social Science Information*, VII (1968), 173-199.
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- 28 "The Biographical Pattern in Traditional Narrative," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, I [1964], 114-129.
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‡ 32Einfache Formen, trans. William Templer and Eberhard Alsen, *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, IV (1967), 17-31. First published in German in *Internationaler Kongress der Volkserzählforscher in Kiel und Kopenhagen [1959]—Vorträge und Referate* (Berlin, 1961), pp. 1-11.

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- 52 See *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, II, ed. Henry M. Belden and Arthur Palmer Hudson (Durham, N.C., 1952), 703-714.
- 53 *Lamba Folk-Lore*, Memoir of the American Folk-Lore Society, XX (New York, 1927), xiv.
- 54 Philip Noss, "Gbaya Traditional Literature," *Abbia*, No. 17-18 (1967), 38.
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- 65 *Ibid.*, pp. 42-48.
- 66 *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 68 *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- 69 In the writing of this paper I profited from discussions with Kenneth Goldstein and Joel Scherzer. The comments of my wife Paula were indispensable.

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