

The Structural Analysis of Sesotho Folktales: Propp's Approach

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Abstract

This study attempts to show that Vladimir Propp's Morphological Analysis of Russian Folktales has an influence in the way Sesotho folktales are being analysed. Fifteen Sesotho folktales were analysed (but in this paper only two are used as examples) adopting his method and it was observed that both folktales display some of Propp's 31 functions. Although some of these folktales display as much as 16–20 functions, the average of seven functions is observed throughout the analysis in all folktales. This study recommends that the seven average functions that were observed in the analyses should be regarded as basic model in analysing Sesotho folktales, and that every Sesotho folktale should display seven or more functions as stipulated in Propp's analysis. The study concludes by affirming that Propp was influential in the analysis of Sesotho folktales.

Introduction

The Basotho nation, just like other nations, has its own folktales. The folktales are narrated with the purpose of teaching young ones to behave in a manner as expected by their societies. Folktales are mainly told in non-literate and semi-literate societies. These communities are prevalent in rural areas. Folktales are a form of pastime, told after supper. They help to prepare the young ones for bed. It has been noted that "folktales are handed down vertically from generation to generation" (Nyaugwa: 2008).

The folktales that the young tell are usually the tales their parents or grandparents have told them. Folktales have also been noted to move from place to place as they are told by the usually nomadic master storytellers. These master storytellers are usually senior citizens, especially women. However, it must be pointed out that school teachers and media such as radios and televisions have taken over the roles of these master storytellers especially in the more literate and affluent communities.

During performance, the master storytellers use dramatic devices such as gestures, facial expressions, impersonation and mimicry. Normally, folktales are told to children just for fun. Storytellers expect their folktales to be amusing, entertaining and interesting to their audience. At times, the audience includes adults as the researcher has noted. Fortune and Mutasa (1991:12) are in agreement with the idea of adult audiences and state that "the audience is usually a group of people drawn from the

neighbourhood such as a village and its surroundings. It may include people of all ages and the venue will be the house of a gifted storyteller, often a grandmother.”

In addition, Canonici (1993:56) states that “sometimes story telling is preceded by a brief period of riddling...to sharpen the children’s minds”. After this short mental preparation, a folktale performance begins and the audience partakes in the performance. An active audience laughs, comments, asks questions, and joins in the singing or in rhythmic hand clapping during the period of performance.

Folktales are about every day events. Canonici (1993:54) sees the folktale as a mirror of the society in which it is created. He says folktales are constantly adapted to reflect present conditions. Folktales play significant roles in the daily affairs of a particular group of people. They are usually meant to instruct and teach morals. Virtues like bravery, co-operation, obedience, love etc. are dramatised and exemplified while vices such as selfishness, jealousy, cruelty and others are snubbed.

An additional characteristic feature of the Sesotho folktale is a similar/ single structure. All folktales start with an opening formula and end with a closing formula. In between the two formulae lies the body of the folktale, itself comprising the initial action, complication, climax and resolution.

It is against this background that the study attempts to show the influence of Vladimir Propp on the analysis of folktales in general. Not enough work has been done on Sesotho folktales on the basis of Propp's model to establish it firmly as a kind of grammar of the folktale against which artistic competence can be measured. But the possibilities are there.

Theory and background

In his work, *Morphology of the folktale* (1958) the Russian structuralist and folklorist Vladimir Propp seeks to analyse the tale according to its component parts. Dundes (1964:93) says that by morphology of the tale, Propp meant “the description of the folktale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole.”

Propp divides the tale’s component parts into two categories, namely variables and invariables. Variables are the *dramatis personae* and items in a tale. The invariables (which he calls functions) are the unchanging actions in a tale, for instance the role of trickster. This role can be played by a hare or a lizard in a tale. In summary, Propp (1958:20) says:

The names of the *dramatis personae* change (as well as the attributes of each) but neither actions nor functions change. From this we can draw the inference that a tale often attributes identical actions to various personages. This makes possible the study of the tale according to the function of its *dramatis personae*.

The basic structural unit of Propp's theory is the function. Propp in Wama and Nakatsu (2008), in his Propp identified 31 functions although the functions do not all appear in one tale. Some of the functions are absention, interdiction, violation, consequences. The notion of variables has important consequences for the structure of the folktale. It means that the number of functions in a tale is limited and that the sequence of functions in any tale does not change. Also, these functions remain constant regardless of who performs them. Finally, this means that all folktales have one and the same structure. In a nutshell, exponents of this approach describe the structure or final organisation of the folktale following the chronological order of the linear sequence of its elements. This analysis is termed the syntagmatic structural analysis. This term is borrowed from the notion of syntax in linguistics.

According to Alami (2011:3), 31 functions of *dramatis personae* are distributed among seven spheres of actions corresponding to their respective performers. Spheres of actions mean categories of the characters based on the actions they do in the story. They are: the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess and the father, the dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero.

The American folklorist Alan Dundes is described by Oosthuizen (1977:20) as "the foremost of Propp's disciples". According to Mota (2009:10), Dundes's theory is regarded as structuralist and syntagmatic. Dundes notes that Propp's theory could also be applied to non-Indo-European folktales. He also notes that Propp had ignored the context in which tales were told and had failed to isolate and specify the contents of his functions.

The theory of Dundes has three main aspects. First, he says that a folktale must be studied in its social and cultural context. He calls the unit of content, the etic unit and that of structure, the emic unit. The terms etic and emic unit were coined from the word phonetic and phonemic. An etic unit is a unit of content while an emic unit is a structural unit in a folktale. It is the emic unit that he termed the motifeme, an equivalent to Propp's function.

The most crucial point to note is that Dundes's motifeme is composed of three modes namely the feature, the distribution and the manifestation mode. The feature mode describes the action of the folktale characters, the manifestation mode defines the elements which fulfil the action and the distribution mode is concerned with the place of the feature mode within the storyline.

Dundes (1965) notes that motifemes cluster to form motifeme sequences; for example, lack - trickery - lack liquidated. Propp also observes that motifemes tend to cluster but notes that they function only as pairs e.g. "lack" coupled with "lack liquidated". Like Propp, Dundes notes these functions, interdiction, violation, trickery, complicity, lack, lack liquidated, difficult task and solution. He, however, changes some of Propp's terminology. Dundes (1965) sees a function pair as a nucleus

motifeme sequence. He further says that motifemic depth is determined by the number of motifemes intervening between the initial situation and the last motifeme. When certain sequences recur in a tale, for example in cyclic tales, then we have sequential depth.

According to Msimang (1986:13), Marivate was “among the first to establish that African tales have a fairly simple plot compared to European ones if motifemic depth is considered i.e. each tale consists of a small number of motifemes.” In a study of Tsonga folktales, Marivate (1973) concludes that despite the lack of motifemic depth the folktales have a tremendous complex plot. This is due to a combination of the simple motifeme sequences to form a number of moves which result in sequential depth. This is clearly the case in cyclic folktales. This feature of sequential depth which is so characteristic of African folktales was first observed by Dundes. This is why a number of scholars applied the Proppian model as modified by Dundes. Similarly, the same model will be used and precisely for the same reason to study Sesotho folktales in this study. This is because many Sesotho folktales have simple plots and a small number of motifemes that give them sequential depth when combined. In this case, this study is going to apply Propp’s theory.

Based on Propp’s finding that the number of functions is restricted, he conjectured that the ordinal succession of functions in each magic folktale is always constant. Figure 1 shows the basic structure of the folktales found and proposed by him.

Table 1: Proposed 31 functions

| [Code] Function | |
|---|---|
| 0. [□] Initial situation | 16. [H] The hero struggles with villain |
| 1. [β] Absentation | 17. [J] Branding or marking the hero |
| 2. [γ] Interdiction | 18. [I] Victory over the villain |
| 3. [□] Violation | 19. [K] The liquidation of misfortune or lack |
| 4. [□] Reconnaissance | 20. [↓] Return of the hero |
| 5. [ζ] Delivery | 21. [Pr] Pursuit of the hero |
| 6. [η] Trickery | 22. [Rs] Rescue of the hero |
| 7. [θ] Complicity | 23. [O] Unrecognised arrival |
| 8. [A] Villainy | 24. [L] Claims of a false hero |
| 9. [B] Mediation, the connective incident | 25. [M] Difficult task |
| 10.[C] Consent to counteraction | 26. [N] Solution of a task |
| 11.[↑] Departure, dispatch of the hero from home | 27. [Q] Recognition of the hero |
| 12.[D] The first function of the donor | 28. [Ex] Exposure of the false hero |
| 13.[E] Reaction of the hero | 29. [T] Transfiguration |
| 14.[F] The acquisition, receipt of a marginal agent | 30. [U] Punishment of the false hero or villain |
| 15.[G] Transference to a designated place guidance | 31. [W] Wedding |

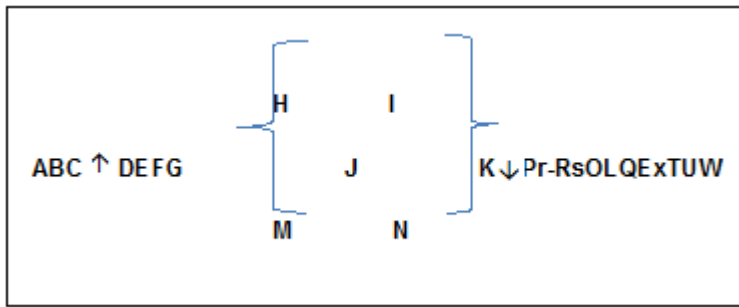


Fig 1: Basic structure

As mentioned earlier, it should be emphasised that Propp himself pointed out that the above rule is perfect for Russian magic folktales but is not generally applicable to narratives, more especially artificially produced tales. In most cases, his idea represents only the characteristics of the Russian magic folktales he analysed. Even though many researchers have tried to apply his idea of constructing a support system for story generation, in most cases the materials they studied involved Russian magic folktales, similar to the work of Propp (Sakuma & Ogata, 2005; Wama & Nakatsu, 2008). From this observation, one can deduce that any attempt to apply his methodology to Sesotho folktales would seem inconsistent. Nevertheless, if it could be shown that his methodology is applicable to Sesotho folktales, this would imply that his idea can be utilised to various arenas, thus facilitating the construction of a system that can automatically generate various types of stories.

Research methodology

A qualitative study was applied for this paper. The researcher himself was the key instrument, meaning that he did everything himself by gathering data from different sources. The researcher took the data as it was and no data was added, cut or manipulated in any form. Ten Sesotho folktales were selected from three popular but different folktale books published in Sesotho: *Diqatjwa Tsa Basotho* (1990); *Ditshomo Tsa Rona* (1986) and *Bokgeleke Ba Basotho* (1993). The steps in the data collection method were reading, classifying, coding and displaying.

Analysis of the story

Sesotho folktales are alive and well (in diverse ways (Moephuli, 1972). Folktales are essentially handed down orally from parent to child or from grandparent to grandchild. The descriptions used in relaying the story, as a matter of course, depend mainly on the specific speakers who try to entertain their audience by telling these stories. This causes slight differences in the same folktale from one locality to another or even from one family to another. In the following sections, analyses are given for “Tselane le Dimo” (Tselane and the cannibal) and “Ntwa ya Diphoofole le Dinonyana” (The battle of birds and the animals) as two examples of Sesotho folktales.

Tselane le Dimo (Tselane and the cannibal)

As is common in most folktales, the preface begins with the “initial situation” [α] “*ba re e ne e re...*”, “*kgale kgale naheng e nngwe...*” (ex. long, long time ago in a certain place...). The environments and scene, including the main characters, become clear, and then the story revolves around these characters. Table 2 shows an analysis of “Tselane le Dimo”. It begins with the “initial situation” and revolves around Tselane, a leading character. She grows up fast and comes to have a determination not to leave her beautiful home because of the monster Dimo. She is determined to risk her life by remaining in the forest. Her obstinance attracted Dimo with his plan to catch and eat her. On the other side, Dimo improvised to get hold of her and at the end he is punished. Finally, Tselane is rescued from the hands of Dimo by her relatives. Figure 2 shows the structure of “Tselane le Dimo” based on the model of Figure 1.

Table 2: Analysis of “Tselane le Dimo”

| Text | Function |
|--|---|
| <p>Long, long time ago in a certain place, there were some parents.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">* snip*</p> | <p>[α] Initial situation</p> |
| <p>Tselane objected to leave her loved house</p> <p style="text-align: center;">*snip*</p> | <p>[□] Violation</p> |
| <p>Dimo imitates her mother to catch her</p> <p style="text-align: center;">*snip*</p> | <p>[ḡ] Trickery and [Pr] Pursuit of the heroin</p> |
| <p>Dimo catches Tselane and puts her in a bag</p> <p style="text-align: center;">*snip*</p> | <p>[H] The heroin struggle with the villain</p> |
| <p>Dimo visits a certain village with Tselane in the bag and</p> | <p>[Rs] Rescue of the heroin</p> |

Tselane is rescued.

snip

Dimo discovers dangerous insects, bees and a dog and gets bitten [U] Punishment of the false hero or villain

snip

Tselane meets her parents and family. [↓] Return of the heroin

α HBC □ DEF ṛ DEFDEF R s U ↓

Fig 2: Structure of “Tselane le Dimo”

Ntwa ya diphoofolo le dinonyana (The battle of animals and birds)

Table 3 shows an analysis of “Ntwa ya diphoofolo le dinonyana” (The battle of animals and birds). It also begins with the “initial situation” and the main character, the perpetrator Phokojwe (jackal) is explained as causing problems in the bird community. He is killing and eating small birds such as doves and chickens. There was a special meeting in which the birds complained about the behaviour of some of the animals towards them. A battle was declared between the animals and the birds. Phokojwe decided not fight and devised a plan to be a referee in order to avoid participating in that battle. He was supposed to stand on top of a hill, wave his tail high to show that the animals are winning or to lower his tail to indicate that birds are winning. Things backfired against him as the birds sent a bee to sting him under his tail so that the tail should be lowered indicating birds victory. Phokojwe became a false hero and a bee a true one.

Table 3: Analysis of “Ntwa ya diphoofolo le dinonyana”

| Text | Function |
|--|---|
| Long time ago animals and birds lived peacefully without problems. | [α] Initial situation |
| *snip* | |
| Jackal kills doves and other small birds | [A] Villainy |
| *snip* | |
| Jackal comes up with a plan. | [ř] Trickery |
| *snip* | |
| Animals and birds are fighting. | [N] Solution of a task |
| *snip* | |
| A bee stung a jackal under the tail | [U] Punishment of the false hero or villain |
| *snip* | |
| Jackal ran away and animals lost the battle | [Ex] Exposure of the false hero |

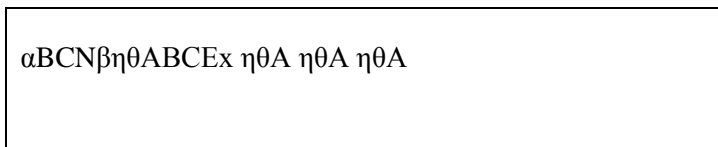


Fig 3: Structure of “Ntwa ya diphoofolo le dinonyana”

Findings and discussion

In analysing the 15 Sesotho folktales, it was observed that they all begin with absentation (lack) and interdictions followed by violations and the inevitable strings of consequences: reconnaissance (normally by an evil spirit or a witch doctor); *trickery, complicity and villainy*. Usually villainy comes as a punishment for the violation of interdiction. Interdiction is usually violated out of sheer stupidity, greed or curiosity. An interdiction may be the consequence of a contract. Sesotho folktales are full of cases of making and breaking of friendship contracts. For instance, in “Ntwa ya diphoofolo le dinonyana”, there is an agreement that both animals and birds should respect each other and live peacefully until Phokojwe (jackal) decides to break that contract by eating small birds.

The analysis in both “Tselane and Dimo” (Tselane and the cannibal) and “Ntwa ya diphoofolo le dinonyana” (The battle between animals and birds) reflected 14 and 16 functions respectively. These functions also differ in order of appearance. In “Tselane and Dimo”, we observed functions: 1–10, 21, 22, 28 and 30; while in “Ntwa ya diphoofolo le dinonyana” functions 2–11, 16, 18, 19, 25, 28 and 30 were noticed. However, “Morena ya neng a e na le bana ba makgwaba” (The king who had crowns [birds] children); adhered to Propp’s morphology as 29 of 31 functions are observed. The average of seven functions is noticed throughout the analysed Sesotho folktales. They are absentation (lack), interdiction, violation, lack liquidation of misfortune, transfiguration (consequences), consent to counteraction (attempt escape) and punishment.

Function, as defined by Propp, represents just the action of the characters. In other words, function itself contains a role of subject or object in a short scene. For example, with the 11th function in Table 1, [↑] departure, the composition of “the hero leaves his home” is predetermined. Also for the 18th function, [I] victory over the villain, the condition that “A works on B” is included in the function. In this case, A is a hero and B is a villain (a hero defeated a villain) or A is a villain and B is a hero (villain is defeated by a hero). From these examples, it seems the reason why the roles of main characters are included in the definition of each function is that the main characters have some kind of symbolism.

The trickery of Dimo (cannibal) in “Tselane le Dimo” and Phokojwe (jackal) in “Ntwa ya diphoofolo le dinonyana” is as emblematic of an adversary that threatens the lives and livelihoods of their communities. Furthermore, it can be assumed that Propp realised the symbolism in the magic folktales he analysed, so he may have hypothesised the concatenation of short plots called “*functions*” as having a role system of subject-object relationships. Throughout the analysis, it was found that this is true in the case of Sesotho folktales. Perhaps by analysing more Sesotho folktales following Propp’s methodology, an observation that can elucidate certain regularities when dealing with Sesotho folktales may be formulated.

In some tested cases, it can be observed that the functions are not only the basic building blocks of the tales but that they do appear in logical, often natural and predictable patterns. But with Sesotho folktales of historical tale type, including myth, legend and various forms of factual accounts defy consistent analysis in terms of the Proppian model, although they do occasionally make use of some of its morphological elements.

On the issue of spheres of actions (i.e. the role of character play in the folktale); the analysed Sesotho folktales revealed the following characters: the villain (Dimo in “Tselane le Dimo”), the donor (Ngaka in “Morena ya neng a e na le bana ba makgwaba”), the helper (Notshi in “Ntwa ya diphoofole le dinonyana”), the hero (Notshi in “Ntwa ya diphoofole le dinonyana”) and the false hero (Phokojwe and Dimo). In “Kgosatsana e neng e sa batle ho nyalwa” (The princess who did not want to marry), the characters included are the princess and her father, the king.

Conclusions and recommendations

In this study, Propp’s methodology was described in approaching Sesotho folktales. Many hurdles were predicted in trying to analyse Sesotho folktales rather than Russian ones as he analysed. However, 15 Sesotho folktales were successfully analysed using 31 functions defined by Propp (but in this paper only two folktales were used as examples in the analysis). Learning that Sesotho folktales comply with an average of seven functions of Propp’s function theory, it might be imperative that when analysing Sesotho folktales those identified functions should be observed. The implication will be that each Sesotho folktale will have the basic function number: 1, 2, 3, 10, 13, 29 and 30 the least. This does not imply that we may also encounter more than seven benchmarked Propp’s functions.

Indeed, there is no doubt that the Proppian model can provide a telescopic window on traditional life and history of any community to whose tales it is successfully applied.

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