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E-ISSN: 2582-0400

litinfinitejournal@gmail.com

Penprints Publication

India

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Litinfinite, vol. 2, núm. 2, diciembre, 2020, pp. 76-87

Penprints Publication

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Integrative Dialogue among Oral Genres Using the Example of Beninese Fairy Tales and Riddles

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Abstract

The term “Rätsel-Märchen” (Eng.: “Riddle fairy tale”) was first used by the Brothers Grimm in the first edition of “Kinder- und Hausmärchen” (Eng.: “Children’s and Household Tales”). With it, they titled the fairy tale 69, which was published in the later editions, namely, in the ones of 1837 and 1840 under the title Rätsel (Eng.: “riddle”). After them, riddles collectors and researchers used this term in their respective works to designate a category of riddles and fairy tales. This article focusses on the latter, using the Beninese fairy tales, especially those of the Fon, as a starting point to show how, through its narrative function in the fairy tale, the riddle contributes to an integrative dialogue between the two oral genres.

Keywords: Fon Fairy Tales, Riddle, Riddle Tales, Narrative Function, Integrative Dialogue

1. Introduction

Literature can be defined in the broadest sense as the totality of written and oral expressions of a people or of a period. For many African peoples, the fairy tale was the only form of literature that existed, as it was not written. The most popular genres of oral literature include fairy tales, proverbs, folk songs and riddles. It has already been proven that the various oral genres have several distinguishing features which enable them to be clearly categorised among themselves (for example in *Einfache Formen* and in *Formen der Volkspoesie*). Despite this categorisation, the boundaries among many of these genres are still fluid. If one considers the Beninese oral genres, one finds that the fairy tale, for example, to a certain extent maintains a relationship with other oral genres. To be more precise: other genres of oral literature are used in Beninese fairy tales. For example, the relationship between Beninese fairy tales and songs and between Beninese fairy tales and proverbs has already been proven (for example in *Deutsch-beninische* and in *Hàn*). However, scientific work on the relationship between Beninese fairy tales and the riddles is still to be done. The question of the riddles in the fairy tales was raised with the first publication of the *Children’s and Household Tales* of the Brothers Grimm, in which they used

the term “Rätsel-Märchen” for fairy tale 69 of the German version in 1812 (Neumann, n. p.). After them, riddle collectors and researchers for example Wossidlo (*Mecklenburgische*) and Aarne (*Vergleichende*) as well as fairy tale researchers and folklorists for example Röhrich (*Wer*) adopted the term in their respective publications and explained the connection between the fairy tales and the riddles. Using the fairy tales of the Fon from Benin, the present contribution examines the problem of the riddle fairy tales in the Beninese collection, focussing on the narrative functions of the riddle in these fairy tales. The aim of the article is to work out the integrative dialogue between the two oral genres.

2. From the riddle to the riddle fairy tale

The riddle – the folk riddle – can be defined as a question that requires an answer (Jolles 119). A question that is not conditioned by knowledge is not a riddle. There were several forms of riddles: e.g. the factual riddles, the word riddles (anchored in the word, language game) and the arithmetic or number riddles. Jolles explains of a riddle game as follows:

Bei dem Rätsel besteht kein Verhältnis von Mensch zu Welt. Hier stellt ein Mensch, der weiß, einem anderen Menschen eine Frage - aber er stellt jene Frage so, daß sie den anderen zum Wissen zwingt. Einer ist im Besitze des Wissens, er ist als Person der Wissende, der Weise; ihm steht ein zweiter gegenüber, den er durch die Frage veranlasst, seine Kraft [...] daranzusetzen, gleichfalls in den Besitz des Wissens zu kommen und sich ihm als Weiser zu zeigen (129-130).¹

A riddle is determined by two sides: a poser and a guesser or guessing person. In the narrative tradition of the Fon, fairy tale evenings are opened with riddle games. Children often have this role to play. These riddles take up various themes that reflect the Fon's everyday life. For example, they can refer to their farming activities, as the following Fon riddle prove: “One of God's creations always go out into the field unclothed, but always comes back home clothed. Who is it?” After the riddle question, the children should think and find the answer. In the case of the given riddle, the answer is the corn. The guesser of the riddle can stick to this short and concise but correct answer. He can also explain his solution if the other children have not understood it. In the example given, the solution is as follows: the maize germ is planted, germinates, becomes a plant and produces maize cobs. Then, the corn cob is harvested and brought home with its husk that envelopes and protects him. To sum up, the corn grain brought and planted in the field represents

¹ Eng.: “In the riddle, there is no relationship between man and the world. Here, a person who knows, asks another person a question – but he asks that question in such a way that it forces the other person to know. One is in possession of knowledge, he is the knower, the wise man; opposite him, stands a second, whom he induces through the question to use his power [...] to also come into possession of knowledge and to show himself as a wise man.”

God's creation, which always goes out into the field unclothed; the second part of the riddle, in turn, represents the corn cob left in its wrapped husk after harvesting, which is brought home.

There should be a certain order in the solution of the riddle, especially if many applicants want to solve the same riddle. In this case, the person giving the riddle has the task of designate a candidate. If the candidate does not find the correct answer, the poser will designate another candidate until one of the candidates finds the correct answer. If no child can find the riddle, the riddle poser takes the floor again and announces the solution. The purpose of this riddle is twofold: firstly, it enables the children to develop their power of reasoning, and secondly, it aims to familiarise the children with the Fon's culture, worldview and way of life, as the riddle deal with their different areas of life. In the riddle game, the best riddle solvers are usually congratulated by compliments or applause. After the congratulations, the storytelling begins in the true sense of the world.

In addition, the riddle has also found its way into the fairy tale and even becomes the main motif in some Beninese fairy tales. Riddles and enigmatic questions appear which influence the core of the tales or the fate of main characters:

Auch mancherlei Märchen leben heute noch im Volke fort, bei denen das Räthsel oder eine aufgegeben dreifache Frage [...] den Kern der Erzählung auszumachen hat (qtd. in Neumann, n. p.).²

The riddle thus offers the fairy tale a narrative context. While Rußwurm places the riddle at the centre in his statement and gives it a high priority in riddle fairy tales, Neumann, on the second hand, focusses on solving the riddle: "Man versteht unter Rätselmärchen allgemein märchenhafte Erzählungen, in denen die Lösung oder Nichtlösung eines Rätsels oder einer rätselhaften Umschreibung eine zentrale Rolle spielen (n. p.)."³

The definition of the riddle fairy tale is not limited to what is mentioned, because the narrative material assigned to the term is very heterogeneous (qtd. in Neumann, n. p.). In the Beninese collection, there are several fairy tales with enigmatic endings which should also be regarded as riddle tales.

² Eng.: "Even some fairy tales live on among the people today, where the riddle or an asked threefold question [...] has to make up the core of the tale."

³Eng.: "Riddle fairy tale are generally understood to be fairy tale stories in which the solution or non-solution of a riddle or a riddle-like paraphrase plays a central role."

3. Fon riddle fairy tales and Fon fairy tales with riddle tasks

In the Fon fairy tales in which riddles are included, the motif associated with them varies from one fairy tale to another. In *Der unehrliche Bräutigam*⁴ (Lanmadousselo 98 -102), for example, the main motif is the name guessing of three king's daughters. The fairy tale can be summarized as follows: A king has three beautiful daughters, whose real names nobody in the kingdom knew. Since he wants to give them to marry, he organizes a competition in which the applicant, who succeeds in guessing the names of the king's daughters within seven days, would get the daughters to become wives. Humans and animals are among the applicants. Yogbo, a ghostly figure, is also among them. He knows that the daughters fetch water far from the royal court in a village and pass under a fruit tree and devises a ruse to find out their names. The day after the opening of the application, he hides in the fruit tree, picks a fruit from it and is on the lookout for the daughters. As soon as he has seen them, he lets the fruit in his hand fall down, thinking they would call each other in astonishment. But one of the daughters silently fetches the fruit and they continue on their way. On another day, Yogbo hides again in the fruit tree and picks several fruits. When the daughters pass under the tree again, Yogbo lets the fruit fall down, the daughters begin to fetch it by calling each other. In this way, Yogbo manages to remember the respective names of the daughters. Unfortunately, he falls ill the evening before the competition and cannot take part in it. He calls his trusted friend Asiansian (big stinking ant) to him and asks him to take part in the competition in his place and tells him the names of the daughters. He makes the following condition: After the competition, Asiansian should give him the king's daughters as wives. Asiansian agrees to this condition. But after he has successfully participated in the competition and the king has given him the daughters to wives, he decides to keep them. But Yogbo doesn't let up. He resorts to a ruse, contacts the daughters and tells them everything that has happened. This is how he manages to marry the king's daughters.

At the centre of this fairy tale is guessing the names of the king's daughters. The poser is the king and the guessers are humans, animals and ghosts. This is not just a game, because the solver gets the king's daughters to be wives. Since the poser assumes that none of the applicants knows the names of the daughters, it is up to the applicants to do their utmost to find them out. It is not a question of the applicants suggesting all the names they knew and hoping that this would enable them to find the names of the daughters. They have to ask for them or use trickery to find them out. This task of guessing names is therefore different from a real riddle game in which the answer is not necessarily given on the spot. Yogbo succeeds in eavesdropping on the names of the daughters through this cunning approach. The rehearsal of name guessing and the search of answer, which takes on a riddle-like game form, are two important components of the narrative

⁴Eng.: "the dishonest groom".

structure of this fairy tale. There are the ingredients that spice up the plot. Furthermore, it is clear from the fairy tale that it is not enough to know the answer to the task. One should also be able to give it to the poser. It is understandable why the king gives Asiansian the daughters to wives instead of Yogbo, because he did not know that he is the true solver. So, the fact that latter resorts to a ruse to get the daughters back to wives restores justice in the fairy tale.

Apart from marriage, behind the name guessing in other Fon fairy tales is the love of a close relative or close relatives. There is no talk of a competition, as in the above-mentioned fairy tale, because such fairy tales are about only one guessing person, but about finding the names of pebble children. In these fairy tales, the name or names of the poser is the focus of the name guessing process. *The old woman and her pebble children*⁵ tells of an old woman without children who comes across pebbles in the field. As they were beautiful and shiny, she wishes them as children. As soon as she has made this wish, the pebbles turn into human-like figures and become her children. But on one day, the pebble children ask the old woman to guess their names and threaten to change themselves back, if she doesn't find their names. The old woman manages to get their names with the help of a nightingale:

The first is called HolokoHoloko,
The second is called HolokoKpassa,
The third is called HolokoTannyi,
The fourth is called Atinmadobonume,
The fifth is called Bonume,
The sixth is called BonumeMinagan,
The seventh is called Titigweti.

Thanks to the help the bird gives the woman, she manages to call the pebbles by their respective names and continue to keep them as children. It is not only in the Fon fairy tales that guessing name contributes to keeping a child or children. *Rumpelstiltskin* (Children's and Household Tale 55, German version) refers to an example case. The fairy tale is about a miller who, by boasting to a king, tells him that his daughter can spin straw into gold. According to this, the king has the daughter brought to his castle and puts her through several tests. He first takes her to a chamber full of straw and orders her to spin all the straw into gold by the early morning of the following day, threatening her with death, if she cannot do so. A little man helps the daughter after she has given him her collar and ring. When the king promises the daughter to marry her if she succeeds again in spinning the straw into gold, the little man refuses to help her and first asks her to have the first child she would have after marrying the king. The daughter accepts his proposal and he

⁵ Told by Moïse Kpangon, the 16. 07. 2016 in Bohicon/Benin and translated into English by me.

helps her to spin the straw into gold again. Thanks to the help of the little man to the daughter, the king marries her and they have a child. As agreed, the little man appears to fetch the child. But the queen did not want to keep her promise. So, the little man makes the fate of the child dependent on guessing his own name. Since the queen doesn't know the name of the little man and still wants to keep her child, she goes in search of it. In the end, it is her messenger who succeeds in eavesdropping on the name from the mouth of the little man himself:

Heute back ich, morgen brau ich,
übermorgen hol ich der Königin ihr Kind;
ach, wie gut ist dass niemand weiß
dass ich Rumpelstilzchen heiß! (Rölleke 275)⁶

With the help of the messenger, the queen gives the name of the little man and keeps her child. The little man was so angry that he kills himself. The latter distinguishes the above-mentioned Fon fairy tale from this Children's and Household Tale. What both fairy tales have in common, is that neither the old woman in the Fon fairy tale nor the queen in the Children and Household Tale has managed to guess the name of the posers themselves. They only manage to do so with the help of another character. This leads to the conclusion that the task of guessing the names they have been given, excludes the generally known. These are not riddles in the true sense of the word, but rather pseudo-riddles:

Sie [Scheinrätsel] sind im Grunde unratbar. Sie verrätseln nicht etwas allgemein Bekanntes, sondern man kann sie gar nicht raten, wenn man nicht die näheren Umstände kennt, die mit der Bildung des Rätsels zusammenhängen (Röhrich 221).⁷

In the Fon fairy tale *L'enfant terrible* ⁸(WekenonTokponto 25 - 40), there is talk of a sequence of riddle tasks, some as difficult as other. The fairy tale tells of a poor married couple who, after long

⁶ Eng.: "Today I bake, tomorrow I brew,
The day after tomorrow, I will take the queen's child,
Oh, how good is it that nobody knows
That I am not Rumpelstiltskin!"

⁷ Eng.: "They [pseudo-riddles] are basically unsolvable. They do not riddle something that is generally known, but you cannot guess them unless you know the circumstances surrounding the creation of the riddle."

⁸ Eng.: "The terrible child".

wishing in vain for a child, ends up having a child. The son is called Unyonwihudada (Eng.: "I am wiser than the king"). In the village where Unyonwihudada and his parents live, no one is allowed to say the word "dada" (eng.: "king"). So it was clear to Unyonwihudada's parents that, with this name, the life of their son are in danger. While Unyonwihudada and other children are playing in a courtyard opposite the royal palace one day, they call him by his name. At this time, the king is near the playing field and has heard the boy's name. Without hesitation, he orders that the boy should be brought to him. He wants to punish him because of his name. So he orders him, although it is raining at that time, to collect wet millet spread out on the ground in the king's court. The boy takes off his shirt and collects the millet in a short time. Because of this achievement, the king becomes angrier, makes the boy his servant and from then on, subjected him to difficult tasks, because he wants to kill him. On another day, he calls the boy to him again and hands him a white buck. He is supposed to take care of the buck for a year so that he can have a young one. The boy doesn't feel affected by the king's difficult task. On the contrary, he accepts the buck. Then he thinks up a trick. He gets an axe and goes under a big baobab near the royal palace and starts to cut it down. Because this act is considered as a crime of lese-majesty, many people run up to witness the boy's act. When the king hears the news that he is about to cut down the sacred baobab, he immediately runs over and asks him the reason of his action. The boy replies that his father has just given birth to a son. He fetches brushwood. He wants to use it to make a fire to watch the baby. After this reply, the crowd breaks out in laughter. The king wonders about this answer and asks him if a man could give birth to a child. Then the boy also asks him if a buck could give birth. With this answer, the whole crowd is on the boy's side and proves the king wrong. The king feels humiliated, so he looks for other ways and means to kill the boy. After a short time, he calls the boy to him again and hand him two stones. From them he should make two things that are indispensable for all mankind. There was a swamp behind the boy's flat, where all kinds of birds sit down. He goes there and asks each of the birds for a feather. The birds grant it to him and he lies down in the swamp and covers his whole body with twigs. The colourful feathers he gets from the birds, he then holds on to the body, flies and sits down on the baobab he wanted to cut down before. From there, he overhears a conversation between the king and one of his sons, in which he discovers that the two things indispensable to humanity that he should make from the two stones he handed him were the sun and the moon. Without hesitation, he finds a stonemason, gives him the two stones and instructs him to make an artificial sun and an artificial moon with the two stones. In fact, the stonemason creates two works of art, similar to the sun and the moon. When the king calls a great assembly and asks for the sun and the moon, the boy takes the two works of art out of his pocket and shows them to him. Ashamed of the boy's wisdom, the king collapses and dies. And Unyonwihudada is appointed king.

In the fairy tales, two riddles tasks stand out: the boy should know how to take care of a buck in such a way that it can give birth and make two things out of two stones that are indispensable for the humanity. Taking the first riddle task into consideration, one comes to the conclusion that this is an unsolvable task, which clearly shows the intention behind it. The boy didn't panic because of the insolubility of the task. He thinks up a similar answer to reject and paralyses the disgusting task by a senseless action (Uther 207). The boy's answer has made the seemingly unsolvable task of the king solvable; because it is conditioned by knowledge that no buck can give birth. Jolles emphasizes that the latter is an essential characteristic of a riddle question (here a riddle task): "This is not a Socratic question, a question that would be posed in such a way that a world is created in the answer, but a question that is already conditioned by knowledge and knowledge a condition (131)". Interesting is the second riddle task that the king gives to the boy to perform, for two reasons: First, the boy should already guess the two things that are indispensable for all mankind; second, he should use the stones that the king has given him to make these things out of the stones. The riddle answer could have been: the water and the air. But can stones be used to make them? The negative answer to this question is evident. The fact that the answer to the riddle question is the moon and the sun, two things that can be sculptured with stones, leads to the claim that the hinge of the riddle question is located at the word "stones". Bausinger points out that such riddles can be solved

If in the quoted riddle the soft spot – and thus the possibility of getting lost – lies in the centre of the sentence [here the sentences], in other cases, the enigma does not start with the verb or the subject, but the hinge is located in some inconspicuous place (123).⁹

The boy did not guess the riddle himself, but rather, as in the above-mentioned Fon fairy tale, he heard the answer from the mouth of the king. After he shows the king the artificially created stars, the king gives himself the death. Jolles emphasises that the death of the poser after solving the riddle places the commented fairy tale in the category of riddle stories:

In den Rätselerzählungen kommt das [das Verhältnis des Aufgebenden und Ratenden] dadurch zum Ausdruck, dass hier das Leben des Aufgebenden auf dem Spiel steht. Sobald das Rätsel [des Königs] geraten ist, stirbt [er] (144).¹⁰

Thanks to his victory over the king, the boy experiences social advancement, which confirms the role of the riddle in the fairy tale.

⁹ Original version: "Liegt bei dem zitierten Rätsel die Weiche – und damit die Möglichkeit des Sich-verirrens – im Zentrum des Satzes [hier der Sätze], so setzt die Verrätselung in anderen Fällen nicht beim Verb oder beim Subjekt an, sondern das Scharnier sitzt an irgendeiner unauffälligen Stelle."

¹⁰ Eng.: "In the riddle stories, this [the relationship between the poser and the guesser] is expressed by the fact the life of the poser is at stake. As soon as the riddle [of the king] is solved, [he] dies."

In the group of the Fon, a fairy tale cycle ends with a riddle question. In such fairy tales, heroes and heroines in danger appear, whose salvation is based on the help of several characters. Because of the abundance of help, the heroes of these fairy tales find it difficult to make a choice among the helpers and are embarrassed. The Fon fairy tale *Qui peut dénouer la situation*¹¹ (Mama 83 - 88), for example, reports on this: A beautiful girl named Adononsi has three trusted friends who have magical powers. The first one can make his eyesight so sharp that he can see over the long distances through dark jungles and high mountains with three words. The second has a shoe that can turn a boat faster than a hawk trying to catch a chick. And the third one is so strong that he can lift a huge baobab with one finger. In one day, Adononsi decides to visit relatives in a remote village, whose access is dangerous due to the present of a huge snake in the area. Although her friends try to dissuade her, she turns a deaf ear to their advice. A few days after her trip, her father contacts her friends and informs them that their friend is missing and asks for help. The friend who can see over great distances, mumbles some magic words and sees that the snake has kidnapped Adononsi and is holding her hostage in a very distant jungle in a big hole. In the village of Adononsi, however, all the villagers know that no woman who has been abducted by the snake has escaped him yet. So the situation of Adononsi is all the more difficult. In a flash, the friends go to the village river. There, one of the friends throws his magic shoe into the river. The shoe turns into a boat and they get in and start rowing. After rowing for a whole day, they see a bright light with the colours of the rainbow. The friend, who has supernatural strength, gets out of the boat and goes into the jungle. At about the front, he comes across the huge snake, an unusually large snake wrapped around a tree and with its head set on the entrance to the hole, where Adononsi is. Carefully he walks up to the snake, which has not noticed his presence, raises its head with a finger so that the snake mistakes him for an ant, and frees Adononsi. On her return, a banquet is organised to celebrate Adononsi's redemption. A quarrel ensues between the three friends, who all want her as their wife. Even Adononsi does not succeed in making up her mind. Even the village elders, who are called to help, were undecided. The fairy tale ends with its title. The help that the friends of Adononsi have given to free her from the snake is closely interdependent. No help among the three is superfluous. The stringing together of the aid is justified by the difficult nature of the rescue. It is precisely in these interdependent efforts of the helpers that the heroine's difficulty lies at the end of the fairy tale to choose a groom from among the helpers. Even the narrator does not dare to speak about it and leaves it to the listeners or readers of the fairy tale. In another Fon fairy tale, the help that some characters give the hero revolves around his resurrection. The fairy tale entitled *The man and his three women*¹² can be summarised as follows: A polygamous man who has three wives wants to visit his trusted sick

¹¹Eng.: "Who can solve the situation?"

¹² Told by Lucien Ghézo, the 16. 07. 2016 in Bohicon/Benin and translated into English by me.

friend who lives in another village with his wives. The day they decide to set off, it rained a lot. So, the river, which is located between the two villages and which the man and his wives have to cross, flows with a strong current. When they arrive at the river and want to cross it, the man, out of the caution, asks his three wives to let him across the river first so that they can remember its shallow part. The man then looks for a large stick to help him cross the river. After he has managed to cross the river with difficulty, he limps exhausted under a tree near the river and dies unexpectedly. The three Women, in turn, quickly cross the river and hurry to help their husband. They notice that he has already died. All are inconsolable. Because of the unexpected death of her husband, the first woman decides to go into the forest to be eaten by the wild animals. The second woman decides to return to the village to ask her relatives for help in burying the deceased. The third woman, for her part, wants to watch over the body of the deceased man so that no wild animals eat it. The second woman manages to get some people to help with the burial of the body at the side of the incident, because, according to the customs of the village, the dead should not be transported by river. The first woman, who has decided to be eaten by wild animals in the forest, meets a hunter in the forest and tells him all her suffering. The hunter promises to raise her husband back to life, if she can get him a snuff box. Since the first woman knows that her husband was a tobacco snuffer and always carried a snuff box with him, she accepts the hunter's condition and both of them go to the scene of the accident together. The two other women and the relatives are about to attend the deceased, when the hunter and the first woman appear and break off the burial. The first woman goes to the body of the deceased man and successfully searches for the snuff box in the pockets of the robe the dead man is still wearing. She hands it to the hunter who prepares a magic potion with the tobacco it contains, which he spreads on the body. The deceased wakes up immediately afterwards. When the resurrected man is told the story of his resurrection, he wants to know which of the three women loves him most deeply. The fairy tale ended with this indirect question.

In comparison to the fairy tales commented on above, the both latter differ in that they have a certain technique of riddle. They deal with the difficult situation of the heroes, which, in the course of the story, makes the reward of the helpers more difficult, due to the abundance of help that the heroes receive. The riddle question is the punch line of these tales, which is why they should also be regarded as riddle tales.

4. Conclusion

The examination of the topic shows that the border between the fairy tales – especially those of the Fon – and the riddles are fluid, because riddle or riddle tasks play an important role in the commented fairy tales. These are the rehearsals that the heroes and heroines have to complete in order to achieve happiness. Certain Fon fairy tales in which several helpers contribute to the

heroes' salvation also end with a riddle like-question. In such fairy tales, these riddle questions show the heroes' hesitation to choose one of the helpers. In this respect, the riddle-like final questions play a narrative role. In this way, the narrators allow the listeners or readers of the Fon fairy tales to think about the answer. Riddle or riddle tasks thus characterise the Fon fairy tales not only in terms of content but also in terms of narrative style. Thus, the Fon fairy tales and riddles are complementary to each other and are in an integrative dialogue. This dialogue is reinforced by the term "riddle fairy tales".

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