STRUCTURAL MODELS IN FOLKLORE
AND TRANSFORMATIONAL ESSAYS

APPROACHES
TO
SEMIOTICS

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to Erik and Nicolas

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I. TOWARDS THE INVESTIGATION
OF NARRATIVE COMBINATORICS: INTRODUCTION

ELLI KÖNGÄS MARANDA

The essay reprinted here was intended as a sketch which we at the time of writing, in 1962, wanted to develop further. A number of the ideas have been in the meantime elaborated by one or the other of the authors, working on other materials, other genres, other tradition areas. We have also spent two years in Melanesia, in a predominantly pagan society where myth and ritual are fully alive and form the core of the culture. The wealth of the new materials collected — roughly estimated, 12,000 pages of texts, over a thousand riddles, several hundred magic formulas, and perhaps 200 hours of storytelling and music on tape — is so great and the task of preparing them for publication, translating, annotating, correlating, analyzing, is so urgent that it seems impossible for us at present to return to the materials of this essay. We have therefore decided to correct only the printing mistakes which marred the first edition, and to make but a few slight alterations and additions to the text as such. On the whole, the exposition is left untouched. It is fitting to do so also in order to allow the original ideas, however germinal and underdeveloped, to speak for themselves. We restrained ourselves even from inserting Lau examples, first, because of the great distance between them and the examples here used; secondly, because most of Lau narratives are so long that they could not be quoted in this space without serious distortion; thirdly, because considerable background materials would be necessary for any interpretation.

Some general observations can, however, be reported. We lived in a society where knowledge is money and those who know in fact cash in. Performing a sacrifice, a cure, or protective magic, or singing the sacred epics (*'ai-ni-mae*, literally 'the root-of-the death') of a clan can bring rewards which compare favorably with what a man working 'overseas' on a coconut plantation would save in a year. The epics are well known by many, but they cannot be performed by just anybody.

Rather, the specialists have a knowledgeable audience, well aware of the operations performed. Here is a first point which we wish to stress : that to live and maintain its richness, oral literature, like other arts, rests on the audience, on its reactions, its criticism and its encouragement, and that without a knowing and sophisticated audience any lore soon turns moribund. This is of course what von Sydow spoke of when he discussed active and passive carriers of tradition. In modern terms, one would here see folklore as communication, narratives (and other items) as messages, storytelling as information transmission, storytellers as encoders, audience as decoders, the language of myth as intertwined codes, and differences between generations as noise. (Köngäs Maranda, 1963b, pp. 84-126).

Yet we are not, on the basis of our recent experience, totally convinced that all recitals are intended for information transmission. In Lau society, there is much information exhibiting, and often so performed that the decoder is prevented from learning the item. Thus, for example, the names of ancestral villages have their poetic variants, as such lyrics of several lines. A full recital of an 'ai-ni-mae will contain the poem in case of each occurrence of a place name. But our epic singers would guard their knowledge by reciting those poetic parts so fast that they became unintelligible. For our collecting purposes, those poems were separately and privately given — classified information if you wish. This even that the place names are so abundant that the danger of an unauthorized snatching by the audience would be in our opinion unlikely : one epic-singer, for example, was able to list and relate to other locations 1,551 place names. He knows them because he masters the 'ai-ni-mae, and, of course, he masters the 'ai-ni-mae for one reason because he knows the onomastic lore.

This man had in his youth made an intentional 'grand tour' of the sacred places in order to learn the geography and history of his world. He had done so acting on the advice of his mother's brother who had been to Queensland in the labor trade and upon his return described white men and their power, and who had become convinced that a 'white peril' threatened also Malaita. Ramoagalo, our man, concluded that the threat was based on white man's knowledge, and set to expanding his own. By his inherited social position and by his personal intelligence and vast knowledge he is perhaps the most prominent Lau man; we also saw him ward off a hurricane by appropriate magic. Local trust in him and in the tradition were once more strengthened when his village stood untouched next to a devastated Christian village.

If this was our historian and theologian, Bobongi, one of the nine
chiefs of Marching Rule, was our verbal artist. Like other leaders of the
nativistic movement, he was sentenced to prison for six years. We
collected several dozens of lengthy narratives from him; many of these
he had learned from another 'agitator' during the peak of Marching
Rule, when the leaders moved about in Malaita on their mission,
dangerous in the view of the colonial government.

But how can a man learn an hour-long story "from Wane Dili during
the Marching Rule, when we slept in the bush"? Mainly because he
only expands his knowledge of combinatorial possibilities. He has
long before learned his basic stock of building elements, such as
genealogies, classes of supernaturals and their 'realms of action', etc.
He also has a store of problems suitable for use as initial situations,
topics such as the origin of mankind (as seen from his universe), the
origin of diversity of languages (in native theory, adopted by the British
administration, there are about a dozen languages in Malaita), the
origin of social organization, the origin of each clan — a problem
activated in the great feasts when the history of the celebrating clan is
sung — the origin of taro, of yam, of coconut, of pig, ceremonially
regulated foods; origins of diverse clan-specific ('totemic') food taboos
and other important regulations of social life. Such problems are
answered by the epics, but the combinatorics is not static, even plots
are not identical, and the problems are not answered always in the
same manner. The singers of the epics, and the tellers of secular tales,
make their decisions: this decision-making is in outline as described
in our tree diagram below (Ch. II. 1.4), only it involves a lot more
detail. The singer's choice of terms, functions, mediators, and outcomes
either satisfies the audience — when their ancestors are glorified or at
least not sold short — or, as we at times witnessed, causes 'scandals'
when there are persons present whose glory is stolen.

The history and prehistory of the celebrating clans is not the only
transformer of Lau plots. Another one, to take a concrete example,
is the context in community life in which an epic is presented. Even the
codes vary: when recited for its informative value, the 'ai-ni-mae can
be told; when recited in a ceremony, they are sung, thus employing two
codes, music and a specialized language. We had a unique experience
of hearing one epic on consequent days presented twice by one performer,
a woman. In the first occasion, she 'told' the story. The recital lasted
almost exactly one hour, was replete with place and ancestral names and
other 'hard facts', all geared to give (or exhibit) information. While

she was finishing her session, in fact answering questions of inter-
pretation, a messenger rushed to the scene to bring the news of a young
woman's death. The storyteller, a competent mourner, left for the wake.
At the wake, she sang the next day the same story to the vocal accom-
paniment of the other women gathered to mourn. The recital was after
two hours interrupted by the arrival of some near relatives and the
hysteric wailing that ensued. She had now omitted almost all factual
information and had now systematically exploited all possible tragic
aspects of the narrative. The difference between the two performances
was discussed afterwards with another member of her community,
a man, who pronounced both renderings good "because when she tells
the story she has to tell what she knows, and when she sings at a wake,
she has to make people cry".

Among the passive carriers we had persons passive as to sacred lore
although well versed in it, and active as to 'neutral' (mola) lore. These
would be the critics : people who at least theoretically mastered the
rules of composition and some of whom were quite articulate and out-
spoken. Yet we must stress the distinction between folkloric and
linguistic messages; although in both domains actual utterances take
place on performance level and in both domains the audience and even
the performer criticizes (as well as builds) the performance according
to a competence model, the competence models of narratives (and
other folklore items) are much harder to map, because the units are
much bulkier than in language. Any linguist can any day gather a corpus
of non-sentences, utterances which are pronounced wrong and corrected
on the spot by the speaker himself or for example by the parent of a
language-learning child; but how many folklorists or anthropologists
have ever collected a narrative which was criticized and corrected or
in any way signalled out as a 'non-myth'?

Despite the differences due to the size of both maximal and minimal
units, linguistic and folkloristic messages have many traits in common.
A language-learner, such as a small child or a foreign speaker, resorts to
'ready-made' units, sentences and phrases learned by heart while
striving to master the rules of sentence-building. Further, there are
stock phrases, such as greetings and many others, which even competent
speakers use without recreating them. But for most of the things one
makes the utterances from pre-existing units following the combinatorics
of his language. We are presently inclined to see narratives and even
more stylized genres, such as riddles, as less stable messages than usually
thought. Myths and other narratives, and for that matter other genres,

are perhaps never learned 'by heart', but the stability which can be discovered is due to the strictness of the combinatorial rules used.

We have supplemented the original article with two more recent essays, one by each author. The new articles may perhaps at first glance seem unrelated, but are each to be considered attempts at mapping transformations, one in a corpus of narratives, the other in a corpus of riddles. And a transformational analysis, to us, is a natural step from the investigation of the structures of folklore 'at rest' to studying them 'in motion', in the dynamic processes which are the essence of folkloric communication.

We wish to express our thanks to those who contributed comments and suggestions either in the germinal phase of the essay or after the publication of the first edition. Among the former are the members of Thomas A. Sebeok's seminar on structural analysis in folklore in 1962 at Indiana University. Among the latter we wish to mention especially Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jerome S. Bruner, Dell Hymes, Suichi Nagata, Philippe Richard, and Bernard Jaulin. Only we are responsible for the statements we make, however.