Structuralism and African Literature: A Revaluation

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Despite occasional spirited forays into structuralism by a few adventurous critics, the structural analysis of literary texts has remained an unpopular and unexciting enterprise in the criticism of African literature. One reason for this unpopularity may be the challenges constituted by the technicalities involved in structural analysis, at least the way it is presently approached by its foremost practitioners. The consequence of this peripheral position to which structuralism has been pushed in the criticism of African literature is that we have a dearth of significant criticism and critics in this tradition. What we have is rather a surfeit of critics in the sociological tradition who, unable to stretch their imagination beyond a concern with the sociological content of works, are content with making disparaging remarks that do not any way reveal an awareness of the role structuralism can play in advancing the fortunes of African literature.

Yet even when such critics refuse to admit the relevance of structuralist criticism, it is often clear that their own critical practice has structuralist influences and intentions.

Take for instance the "form and content" critics of African literature. Their bold statements of intentions to analyse the *form* and *content* of chosen literary artifacts end up as exercises in the exegesis of content. This is due mainly to the fact that most of such critics do not possess the tools of structural analysis which are indispensable to a stylistic analysis of form. They, therefore, end up with superficial generalizations about "tightly structured plots", "effective use of flashback", "impressive deployment of symbols" and other such vague statements which tell us virtually nothing about the form or structure of the works being analysed.

The criticism of African literature is so replete with such examples that rarely can any criticism in the purely sociological tradition be found that does not evince this problem. This underlies the need for an alternative approach to *form* and *structure* in African literature, a need that structuralism has been found capable of fulfilling if only our critics would brace themselves up for its challenges.

Structuralism as a taxonomic approach to literature has a rather recent history. It could be said to have come into use with the formalist analyses of tales in the Afanasev collection carried out by Vladimir Propp, whose findings were first published in his *Morphology of the Folktale* in 1928, but which remained inaccessible to an English readership until the first English translation appeared in 1958.

To place Propp at the beginning of structuralist studies is, of course, an exercise in convenience, since if one went into an area like linguistics, one would find antecedent investigators who have progressed along structuralist lines, although their interest may not have been folklore or literature necessarily as was the case with Propp.

Structuralism is one of those novel analytical methodologies evolved and adopted to investigate some of those more elusive aspects of knowledge that have defied the established modes of enquiry. Like most academic enquiries that are explicatory, it arises from the inquirer's realisation that certain objects of study do not easily yield meanings unless a certain analytical rigorousness is applied to them.

All efforts made in literary criticism since the New Critics have been attempts to look at the literary artifact as an objective entity which can be analysed on its own without any reference to extrinsic factors. The assumption, of course, is that a literary object has its own ontology, and so such extrinsic factors as the biography of its author, its social context, etc. became extraneous details, a consideration of which was irrelevant to an understanding of the work.

Within this framework, literary works were approached directly and made to yield meaning, for they were seen as organic systems that must be approached on their own holistically.

Claude Levi-Strauss blazed a new trail when he holistically adopt this objective approach in his structural analysis of myth. He approach was unique because he was a ethnologist, involved in an area of inquiry where extrinsic factors were usually central to the analysis of data.

In essence, structuralism in the social sciences and literature means formalism, in its concern with form as opposed to content. It really began as a linguistic term, in the work of the Russian structural linguist, Roman Jakobson. But it relies heavily on the assumptions of the father of structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure.

Saussure had, in fact, established the important distinction between *langue*, the structural side of language, and *parole* the statistical side, as an integral part of his contention that language is a system of signs in the combination of signals and signifier.

Saussure was among the earliest analysts to recognize that language is a self-contained system whose interdependent parts function and acquire values through their relationships to the whole. In this methodology, the atomistic, piecemeal approach to the study of philology gave way to appreciating the totality of the work as a whole. This also marked the shift from a diachronic to a synchronic study of language.

The work of structural linguists showed that
(1)   Language is a system,
(2)   Language is highly patterned, and

(3)   The native speaker is not consciously aware of the
        patterning but uses the patterns nevertheless.

Levi-Strauss' insights from structural linguistics were the basis of his structuralist approach to the study of myth. And his most relevant work, in which he defines his views in clearest terms, is "The Structural Study of Myth".[1] This essay is inspired by Levi-Strauss' disturbance that a lot of confusion has featured in interpretations of myth since Tylor, Frazer and Durkheim, a confusion occasioned by the various alternative readings of myth which the various approaches make room for. The time had come, he felt, for the right approach to be found and adopted, since an "awareness of a basic antinomy pertaining to the nature of myth" is what "may lead us towards its solution".[2]

The number of investigations and reactions triggered off by essay are possibly the reason why structuralism has become almost synonymous with Claude Levi-Strauss. His lcontributions to structuralist studies have, in fact, been so pervasive in their effect that his image has dwarfed almost every other person that has made forays into structuralism. Our present discussion of structuralism as an analytical methodology is therefore basically a discussion of Levi-Straussian Structuralism.

Levi-Strauss' initial investigations into the way myths operate, how they can be interpreted, and how they can be better understood originate from his contact with the ideas of Roman Jakobson, during his tenure as visiting Professor at the New School for Social Research in New York (1941-45). Here, he derived two seminal aspects of his thought that he was later to develop.

The first is that "in linguistic behaviour the mind is invariably guided by a system of binary differentiation". Secondly, "in communication between two people, for the message to be meaningful there has to be a *code* of understanding at least partially common to both of them. This code operates at a more or less *unconscious* level, and guarantees that there is a *system* through which the units of communication are processed."[3]

Levi-Strauss finds the modern concerns with myth analogues to the concerns of early philosophers of language with linguistic problems. In the case of the philosophers of language, once the obvious contradictions were overcome or resolved, linguistics could begin to evolve as a science. This was possible because linguistic analysis recognised that language is a highly patterned system whose patterning the native users are not even aware of. But a patterned system, its constituents can be atomised in order to arrive at meaning.

Myths could therefore be best analysed if tied to a linguistic model, since the study of myth could best be conducted if myths are seen as a kind of language with its constituent parts.

One of Levi-Strauss' objectives in this essay is to show that myth "is both the same thing as language, and also different from it."[4] The main similarity which he sees between myth and language is the idea of patterning, and so he contends that we must be

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able to recognise in myth and underlying structure and isolate the components of that structure in order to move towards a meaning.

In his view however, if a myth must be meaningful, its meaning cannot reside in the isolated elements (the mythemes) which enter into its composition, but in the way those elements are combined i.e. meaning arises from the relationship between isolated elements in a system. But although a myth is made up of constituent units, "the true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but *bundles of such relations* (emphasis his) and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning."[5]

Just as the structure of language could be identified by reorganising the components of language at the levels of morpheme, phoneme and sememe, so can the structure of myth be arrived at by reducing whole myths to the sentence level, and determining the relations of the mythemes which are revealed at this level to the overall meaning of a myth.

But although the sentences into which a myth can be broken down and which represent and carry the surface meaning of a myth may vary, and therefore change this meaning from one variant of the myth to another, the underlying structure that is the concern of structuralism, since structuralist like Levi-Strauss believe that it is this underlying structure of the "gross constituent units" that determines the real meaning of a myth. In fact in his later work, *The Raw and The Cooked*,[6] he sees this structure as an unconscious one, hence his questionable position that "myths operate in men's mind without their being aware of the fact."[7]

Myth being one of those universal expressions of human communication and consciousness, Levi-Strauss recognizes that the same myth can come in various versions. Therefore to arrive at a meaning, one must take into consideration all the practice among linguists: "to them [linguists] the only way to define the meaning of a term is to investigate all the contexts in which it appears ..."[8] Therefore, "if a myth is made up of all its variants, structural analysis should take all of them into account." By using systematically this kind of structural analysis it becomes possible to organise all the known variants of a myth as a series forming a kind of permutation group ..."[9]

These are the structuralist assumptions that underline his analysis of the various variants of the Oedipus myth, and cross-checking his findings on all the known versions of the Zunu origin and emergence myth, and similar myths among the Pueblo Indians.

In what almost sounds like a personal epiphany, Levi-Strauss notes two important advantages of his structuralist method:

(1)   it brings some kind of order into what was previously chaos; and
(2)   it enables us perceive some basic logical processes which are at the root of mythical thought.[10]

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Given this kind of rearrangement of the constituents of myths made possible by structuralism, and its consequences, we are compelled to see the sense in Levi-Strauss' earlier contention in the essay that "Whatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader throughout the world."[11] When applied to written literature, we can say that this structuralist conclusion makes it possible for a reader or critic with the right orientation to understand a novel from Brazil, a poem from Siberia or any literary artifact from New Zealand, because what the procedure reveals is the relationship of constituents which add up to the meaning of texts. More importantly, we are to see the reasons for, and thus be willing to accept his conclusion that the Oedipus myth "has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous ... to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman."[12]

Thus, Levi-Strauss justifies his thesis that "The purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of over coming a contradiction."[13]

The implications of Levi-Strauss' structuralism as an analytical methodology in contemporary scholarship in the social sciences and literature are numerous, and are evident in the variety of the reactions to the methodology, some of which I shall point out presently.

I, for example, have noted elsewhere[14] the cumbersome nature of Levi-Strauss' structuralist theory, and (following Okpewho) have observed that shortcomings of structuralism in any consideration of the mental processes at work in the imagination of the oral artist (the myth-maker) during compositon.[15]

Isidore Ckpewho has also challenged Levi-Strauss' subordination of the role of the artist to the idea of an intrinsic pattern.[16] Okpewho does not, in fact, see as valid Levi-Strauss' placement of the activity of myth-making in the unconscious, thereby denying myth narrators conscious intellectual control over their material. I believe it is illogical to suggest (as Levi-Strauss does) that both narrator and audience (as native users of the language of a particular myth) would be unaware of the deep structures of myth while at the same time understanding the mediation of opposites brought about the same structures.

Another point is that Levi-Strauss' structuralist reduction of narratives to abstract algebraic formulas side-tracts the literary and artistic embellishments of such narratives, apart from erroneously under-mining the importance of content.

And his contention that every detail of a myth has significance has been objected to by scholars like G.S. Kirk[17] who thinks that Levi-Strauss totally and deliberately disregards the facts and circumstances of story-telling which are an important part of oral literature of which myths form a part.

We might add here that the binary theory of opposites which emerges from Levi-Strauss' structuralism might only best suit some, but definitely not all societies.

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Finally, for our reservations: the etic or paradigmatic approach of structuralism has the danger of imposing non-existent polar opposites on narratives which do not have them, especially if we are supposed to take seriously his position that the cohesive structure of myth is based on a system of binary coding whereby the human mind operates in opposites; and that the binary mode of thinking is a universal cultural expression.

The various problems outlined above would probably explain why structuralism has found very few adherents in the criticism of African literature. Possibly, critics who see literature as sociology *per se* will keep on running away from structuralism, because it seems to discourage the kind of explication that is not matched with a rigorous analysis of the underlying structural configurations from which the meanings of texts emerge.

One critic however who has faced the challenges of structuralism and demonstrated its relevance and applicability to African literature is Sunday Anozie. In various articles,[18] Anozie has applied the principles of structuralism to the analysis of certain texts, and in the process justifies one of his earliest assumptions on the matter:

> If folklore, including myths, proverbs, riddles and other forms of verbal art, constitute an index ("charter" or "model") of a people's mind, then studied objectively and in the appropriate native contexts, they may be seen to embody a creative system, in terms of an original cosmology and hence a metaphysic capable of therapeutically illuminating the nature of a people's social, economic and psychological problems. Structuralism, as a new science of componential systems and significant choices and relationships, may possibly hold the key to an answer.[19]

It is this belief in the potentials of structuralism that inspires Anozie into writing his *magnum opus, Structural Models and African Poetics.*[20] In his adoption of the structuralist procedure in this book, Anozie acknowledges the evolution of the world "structure" from its original architectural meaning to the biological one; from its application in Marxian economics to the sociological (Pareto and Montesquieu); from Newtonian physics to the mathematics of Boole and Galois; and from its use in Saussurean linguistics to Levi-Straussean anthropology. He even recognizes the forays which philosophers in the French tradition (eg. Lalande) and psychologists (such as Jean Piaget) have made into structuralism. But it is Levi-Strauss that he identifies with, with few reservations and deviations.

It is ironical however that it is *Structural Models ...*, Anozie's definitive statement on structuralism in African literature, that has produced the most vituperative reactions from other critics, the most notable among whom is Abiola Irele. Irele has a number of misgivings about structuralism:

> ... structuralist criticism has an inbuilt tendency to treat literary texts as *objects*, as verbal constructs whose interest resides primarily in their

functional structures rather than in the creative imagination of which they are meaningful products ... This accounts for much of the arid dissection of texts that the structuralist method often produces in the work of its less gifted practitioners.[21]

Irele continues:

Structuralist criticism ... functions best at the level of theory or meta-criticism and can only deal adequately with universals of literature, not with the specific qualities of an imagining consciousness located in a world of movement and sense.[22]

Irele contends that Levi-Strauss' structuralism which provides a model for Anozie works "at a very high level of abstraction"; and, worse still, in his view, "its rejection of an empirical approach makes it unsuitable for any kind of concrete grasp of culture as a lived reality and its abstractions are unfitted for the definition of the specific character of any single culture" (Ibid., p. 161).

We agree with Irele that structuralist criticism treats literary texts as objects. But that is not a particularly novel discovery, neither is it peculiar to structuralism, since we see it as a central credo of the New critics too. That, therefore, is an integral part of the methodology itself, just as Marxist criticism takes off on the premise that the sociological content of literature must be interpreted within the framework of base and superstructure. If the dissection of texts carried out along structuralist lines is considered "arid", such "aridity", I think, is not necessarily the consequence of the approach per se, but is the consequence of the distancing occasioned by the particular critic's orientation.

Again, one wonders what is basically wrong with a methodology that attempts to establish that the workings of the human mind can be interpreted at a symbolic level. Or can we consider all the efforts of Ernst Cassirer in vain?

Levi-Strauss' own conclusions from his analysis of the Oedipus myth invalidate the suggestion that the empirical approach of structuralism is "unfitted for the definition of the specific character of any single culture". And Anozie's analysis of Okigbo's "Distances", Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* and Senghor's "Le Totem" conclusively show that structuralist criticism can deal adequately not only with "the universals of literature", but also with "the specific qualities of an imagining consciousness located in a world of movement and sense", contrary to what Irele believes.

Some of the problems with structuralism that form the core of Irele's disapproval of Anozie's adoption of the methodology had of course been recognized by Anozie himself in an early essay where he talks of 'the difficult task of applying the same objective methodology and criteria to works of imagination such as poetry, novel written in Africa" (sic).[23] He notes however that "... the difficulty is due mainly to the presence of extra

linguistic phenomena such as poetic images and metaphors, tropes, etc., charged with evocative associations of ideas and feelings."[24] For this reason, he gears his efforts "towards discovering ways and means of effectively dealing with the problem of emotion-coefficients in poetry",[25] efforts that yield significant results.

The problems with structuralism therefore are not as intractable as they have been made to seem. Despite its shortcomings, Levi-Strauss' and his followers' use of the method in either their ethnological investigations or in their literary analyses are efforts to reduce the enormous amount of information about cultural systems to what they believe are the essentials, and establish the formal relationship between their elements, as a guide to their meaning. To a large extent, they succeed.

Again, the taxonomic practice of reducing tales into basic units as a preface to analysis validates the methods of Vladimir Propp's formalism by demonstrating the need for a taxonomist approach that can provide insights into structures of whole myths, and all forms of oral and written literature. In this way, he validates the position of the New Critics who see literary texts as creations with their own 'ontological situs'[26] and gives credence to the efforts of some contemporary critics[27] whose analyses have yielded surprising results in literary criticism.

If one wanted to stretch the matter, one could also argue that the current emphasis on *form* in the criticism of our "form and content" critics is a reflection of the inevitable unconscious acceptance of the relevance of structuralism in the contemporary criticism of African literature.

But, probably, one of the most noteworthy insights we gain from Levi-Strauss' structuralism, which derives from his conclusions about the workings of the so-called primitive mind, is encapsulated in the following statement which I am compelled to quote at length. It is a major contribution to social thought, and a heavy blow on the racist conclusions that have featured in ethnological and folklore studies since. G.J. Frazers's *The Golden Bough:*

> Prevalent attempts to explain alleged differences between the so-called 'primitive" mind and scientific thought have resorted to qualitative differences between the working processes of the mind in both cases while assuming that the objects to which they were applying themselves remained very much the same. ... the kind of logic which is used by mythical thought is an rigorous as that of modern science ... the difference lies not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of the things to which it is applied.[28]

Thus Levi-Strauss dismisses the distinctions that had earlier been insisted upon by earlier investigators between "scientific thought' and "primitive thought". For one thing, the physiological configuration of the human brain, and the nature of the workings

of the human mind make such distinctions difficult to sustain, and therefore unnecessary. The dissolution of this racist distinction, is one of the most noteworthy contributions of structuralism to modern thought in the social science and literature, a contribution that has proved of immense benefit so far to African literature. Scholars who were erstwhile uncertain about the literary status of African oral literature, and the written literature based on it, now move with unprecedented confidence into these literatures, since the tools of structural analysis applied by Levi-Strauss to myths have been proved to apply to them as well. It is now left for the critics who have been shying away from structuralism to face the challenges squarely.

Notes

[1] First published in *Journal of American Folklore*, 68, 1955. My references to this article in my essay are to the reprint in T.A. Sebeok (ed.), *Myth: A Symposium*, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1965.

[2] Ibid., p. 83.

[3] This paraphrase is from Isidore Okpewho, *Myth in Africa,* Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 37.

[4] Levi-Straiss in Sebeok, op.cit., p. 84.

[5] Ibid. p. 87.

[6] See Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked,* Harper and Row, 1970. This book is the first volume of his monumental four-volume *Mythologiques.*

[7] Ibid, p. 12.

[8] Levi-Strauss in Sebeok, p. 90.

[9] Ibid. p. 99.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid. pp. 85-86.

[12] Ibid. pp. 91-92.

[13] Ibid. p. 105.

[14] See Chinyere Nwahunanya, "Towards a Literary Approach to the Oral Narrative", in Ernest Emenyonu (ed.), *Critical Theory and African Literature*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1987, pp. 160-176.

[15] For details of the oral formulaic theory see A.B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*. New York: Athenium, 1976, Chapters 2 and 3.

[16] See Isidore Okpawho, "Poetry and Pattern: Structural Analysis of an Ijo Creation Myth", *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 92, No. 365. (July-September 1979).

[17] See for instance G.S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970, p. 73.

[18] For example "A Structural Approach to Okigbo's Distances" *The Conch*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1969 (Reprinted as a chapter in his *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric*, London and Ibadan: Evans, 1972);

"Structure and Utopia in Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*", *The Conch*, Vol. II, No. 2, September 1970; "Structuralism in Poetry and Mythology",*The Conch*, Vol. IV, No 1, March, 1972. Se also his *Structural Models and African Poetics*, London: Routeledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, especially Chapters 2 and 8.

[19] See his introductory essay, "On Structuralism", *The Conch*, Vol. II. No. 2, September 1970, p. 2. Significantly, this special number of *The Conch* is devoted to structuralism.

[20] See Note 18 above.

[21] These comments are from Abiola Irele, "Sunday Anozie, Structuralism and African Literature", in Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.) *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature, 1700 – The Present*, Vol. I, Lagos: Guardian Books, 1988, p. 159.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Sunday Anozie, "Structuralism in Poetry and Mythology", *The Conch*, Vol. IV, 1, March 1972.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] The phrase is borrowed from Rene Wellek and Austen Warren, *The Theory of Literature*, London: Peregrine Books, 1978, p. 142.

[27] A modest list of noteworthy formalist/structuralist critics apart from Anozie himself would includes such desciples of Valdimir Proop as Alan Dandes, Eleazar Meletinskii, Ojo Arewa, G.M. Shrieve, Robert Georges, Lee haring, Geororg Horner, Pierre Maranda and Ellis Kongas Maranda.

[28] Claude Levi-Strauss in T.A. Sebeok, op.cit. p. 106.

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