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NARRATION OF MYTHS AS TRANSVALUATION: THE EXAMPLE OF NGEMBA,  
CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the general structure of narration of myths in Ngemba, and its relation to the people's culture. It equally looks at how myths express opposing tension at the actantial and agential levels of narration and the consequent transgressions therein. These opposing tensions can be best understood in terms of rank and markedness, simply put as transvaluation. Transvaluation, within this context, reevaluates the perceived, imagined or conceived markedness and rank relation of a referent as delimited by the rank and markedness relation of the system of its signans and the teleology of the sign user. As a result, the referent is given a certain order and valuation by means of reevaluating its signans. In this light, the paper is based on the contention that societies are concurrently the geographical and historical manifestation of cultures. In the course of the analysis, it was discovered that the actantial and agential narrative types evident and discussed in the analysis, establish different valuative tensions, consequently showcasing the ground on which the Ngemba tradition anchors. Finally, the analysis proved that Ngemba myths constitute a charter that supports tradition and status quo.

**Keywords:** Myth, actantial, agential, rank, makedness, transvaluation, narration

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INTRODUCTION

Myths could be viewed as a representation of action, which can be analyzed from a series of consequentially related sequences. These units of action are known as mythemic sequences, made up of the following categories: agent, action, patient and consequence. Each sequence mirrors the syntactic structure of the action and serves as a schema for dividing and organizing events in the myth. In this light, an agent acts upon a patient and changes the condition or state of the patient. Although the mythemic sequence seemingly performs several roles, it maintains the integrity of the sequence as one unit. The various aspects found within the sequence are hierarchically superimposed, showing that the basic unit of action in myths can be analyzed into features of two related levels. First, the agential level of narration, which constitutes the general features of the dramatis personae (agent/patient) in terms of their biophysical, social, political and

economic characteristics. Second, the actantial level of narration, which determines the narrative roles of the agents and patients and emphasizes the importance of features (social, political and economic etc.) of the dramatis personae to the myth. These different levels of narration constitute the main thrust of this work. As James Jakob Liszka in *The Semiotics of Myth: A Critical Study of Symbols* puts:

It is precisely the interaction of these two levels that accounts partially for the transvaluative character of the narration. From the perspective of the tale's culture, the agent and patients can be characterized in terms of a certain hierarchical schema: human/animal, divine/human, men/women, old/young, allies/enemies, kin/nonkin, etc. The actantial level superimposes relations on this first agential level by giving these agents some dramatic roles. This superimposition may assimilate the two levels, so that kin may ally against nonkin, human against animals; or it may create a displacement in which kins become enemies and culturally typical enemies' allies. In either case, this second, actantial, level serves as a transvaluation of the first. (121)

The tension, as shown above, therefore impels one to probe into the general structure of narration of myths in Ngemba and its relation to the people's culture. Such an approach, I believe, gives a complete picture of myth and culture. Finally, the paper also looks at how myths express opposing tension at the afore-mentioned levels and the consequent transgressions therein. These opposing tensions can be best understood in terms of rank and markedness, simply put as transvaluation. Transvaluation, within this context, reevaluates the perceived, imagined or conceived markedness and rank relation of a referent as delimited by the rank and markedness relation of the system of its signans and the teleology of the sign user. As a result, the referent is given a certain order and valuation by means of reevaluating its signans. Within the same ambit, transvaluation coordinates the depth and the breadth of a sign, driving us to see it as a species of interpretant, and paving the way for a detailed understanding of the pragmatics of sign.

#### **AGENTIAL LEVEL**

Before delving into the analysis, it is necessary to note that the condition of production of the myths analyzed in this paper is very imperative, both at the agential and actantial levels of analyses. Consequently, the cultural, political, social, historical and economic contexts are indispensable. It is worth noting that Ngemba cuts across the North West and Western regions of Cameroon as Francis Yameni observes in "Identification du Dialecte de Référence du Ngemba". Talking about the relation between the people of North West and Western regions, Linguists and Historians affirm that both are Mbamkam. However, the focus of this paper is on the Ngembas of the villages in the North West region that claim Tikar and Widikum Origins. These villages include: Bambili, Bambui, Nkwen, Menda- Nkwen, Bafut, Mankon Akum, Alatening, Awing Pinyin, Chomba and Mundum. E. M. Chilver and Phyllis Kaberry in "The Journal of African Languages" note that these villages share many cultural, social and political institutions, which were probably diffused from the Upper Mbam river region. Besides this, the linguistic similarities help unify them, as most languages within this cluster, to an extent, are intelligible. Etymologically, in all the villages, the word Ngemba means: "I say". However, there are some little variations in pronunciation as one moves from one village to the other.

Myths, as earlier mentioned, are broken into mythemic sequences (the basic units of action). These sequences are piloted by the actions of the agents, patients and the consequence of their actions. The agential analysis examines the general features of the dramatis personae. The dramatis personae in Ngemba vary. Some myths have divine figures, legendary figures, human beings and superhuman beings, while in others, only animals, birds, toads, chameleon etc play the roles of agents and patients. This is the case with the Ngemba myths on "The Origin of Eternal Death" and "The Origin of the Rainy and Dry Seasons". In some others, inanimate objects respond to human stimuli, thus participating or behaving as living objects. In the myth, "The Origin of the Bambui village", the Sacred Forest and the Lake behave virtually like human beings. The lake travels, but before travelling, it announces its departure as well as its eventual return. The divine figures in Ngemba myths include God, gods, super humans and spirits. Ntsu'u in "The Myth of Atutu<sup>i</sup>" is a superhuman being. The protagonists in "The Traveller who Marries the Lover of a Water Nymph" and in "The Origin of Lake Awing" are spirits and superhuman beings.

The biophysical characteristics, kinship and social relations, economic and political strength, as well as the rank of agents and patients in Ngemba myths are culturally defined. That is why the Ngemba people prefer to ascribe human roles that determine the mortal and immortal state of man to dogs, chameleons or toads. It is evident in Ngemba philosophy that these animals expose the character traits of the people who lived long ago, and their role in shaping man's destiny on earth. They also think that if characters, who today are strategically replaced by oral performers with names of animals and birds or inanimate objects were known, the society would obviously eliminate or stigmatize anybody who has bearing to such ancestry. For this reason, performers use names of animals with the similar character traits. This "thingification" is accepted by the society or culturally imposed. This can be further proven by the fact that these animals, literally, suffer the fate as a result of being used in these myths. The chameleon remains a perpetual enemy to the Ngemba people, and no Ngemba man hesitates to kill it each time it surfaces out of its closet. The toad remains a permanent "football" to the Ngemba man. The dog (in some cases) hunts, guards, but never will taste the real fruits of its labour. As long as man is a mortal being, these animals remain victims of circumstances. With this in mind, I will proceed in the examination of the general features of agents and patients within a defined cultural context - Ngemba.

### BIOPHYSICAL FEATURES OF CHARACTERS

The biophysical features of the agents /patients focus on their general position in cultural taxonomy that classifies their biological, physical or cosmological type. Biophysically, there is the distinction between mortal and immortal, human and animals, male and female at the animate level. Consequently, God, the water gods, and Atutu are seen as immortals while man is viewed as mortal. In order to evaluate these relations paradigmatically, the concept of markedness will be revisited. Liszka views "markedness" as "... the valuative relation between the two poles of an opposition, which establishes an asymmetry between them" (*The Semiotics* 62). In the same light, Edward Battistella in "Markedness: The Evaluative Superstructure of Language" adds that the "thesis of markedness is the proposition that in all opposition lies an inherent non-equivalence destined in terms of presence or absence of property or feature" (42). Battistella is suggesting that the marked and unmarked relation can be likened to the relation between the normal and abnormal. Similarly, Michael Shapiro in *The Sense of Grammar* opines that "the marked sign is conceptually more complex than its unmarked counterpart" (79). Since it is more complex, it automatically provides more information than the unmarked sign. Liszka summarises this as follows:

I think these three characterizations - presence/absence, simplicity/ complexity, normal/abnormal - all, which emphasize the asymmetry between terms of an opposition, are interrelated. If psychologists define normal as the absence of neurosis then normal is an unmarked condition which serves to characterize behaviour that is a normative background to more complex, focussed behaviour which are deviations and derivations of norms. (*The Semiotic* 63)

From the foregoing, markedness therefore refers to the abnormal, complex and absence of a property while an unmarked situation refers to the normal, simple and the presence of a property. These distinctive features or properties in any structure are displayed paradigmatically and syntagmatically, where one contrasts the other.

From the onset, all animate beings and mortal beings are supposed to be marked because of the possibility of changing their form through death, something which is absent in immortal beings, thus making them unmarked. However, because the Ngemba man sees the presence of some property in man, which are absent in the woman, they present him as unmarked contrary to his counterpart ( the woman) who is viewed as abnormal, complex, thus marked. The marked nature of the woman makes the society to see her more or less as a second-class citizen or improved specie of other animate objects. This culminates to the mistreatment of women. In some cases, people abandon their wives for bringing forth only females offspring. Others threaten to kill female children. In order to satisfy this patriarchal appetite, some women in their endless quest for male children, die at child birth. Also, the fact that a woman leaves his father's compound for the husband equally means losing something (maiden name). These elements relegate her to a marked

position. In addition, the Ngemba man sees women as evil, as is the case in the myth “The Origin of the Mystery of Death”, wherein, the woman is held responsible for the effective present and cruel nature of death. The presence of this evil in them makes them marked in the society. As a reminder, the notion of markedness is contextual. Most often, it is society-oriented.

The markedness shown above establishes a set of valuative opposition amongst the dramatis personae in most of the myths. In the Ngemba myth on “The Origin of Eternal Death”, tension develops between human and non-humans as the chameleon (because of envy or wickedness) sounds the message of eternal death. As a result, man and chameleon become arch-enemies. They try to kill each other each time they meet – man strikes down the chameleon while the latter emit its deadly venom at the former. The relation becomes that of the hunter and the hunted. Similarly, man and the toad (bearer of the message on eternal life on earth) become valuatively opposed to the chameleon (bearer of a contrary message). Man and toad are therefore kin related in that they have the same objective - the quest for eternal life or life after death. Although there is conflict between the chameleon and the toad, some avenues of possible conflicts between man and toad are evident. Man can never be happy with the toad for not delivering the desired message on time. To this end, man remains a perpetual pawn in the hands of death. Each time death appears on the scene, man revisits his enmity with the toad or dog. The vectors of the aforementioned valuative tensions are opened-ended and can be eradicated and completed by the role assigned to the agents at the actantial level.

#### KINSHIP FEATURES OF DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Kinship terms are culture-relative. Each culture defines the kinship relation following laws laid down by older generations. In Ngemba, kinship is both consanguinal and affinal. Yet, the majority of Ngemba people struggle to solidify family ties to an extent that it becomes very difficult to distinguish the consanguinal from the affinal. In a typical Ngemba home, it is often difficult to distinguish between stepchildren and children, cousins and children of other households, relations of the wife and relations of the husband etc. It is in this vein that M. Angulu Onwuejeogwu in *The Social Anthropology of Africa: An Introduction* notes that in Africa, “Kinship is, therefore, a socially accepted fact based on biological assumptions, which may be real or unreal” (58). Thus talking about distant or close relation becomes extremely complex.

The myths, “The Orphan Girl and her Step Mother” and “The Orphan Child and her Uncle’s Wife”, illustrate the complexities in the kinship system in Ngemba. The off-quoted myths show that many live in the same compound and share the same farm; the step mother and uncle’s wife take control over the co-spouse and in-laws, with little or no clear-cut demarcation. This life style, if not of the wicked nature of the step mother and the aunt in both myths, only helps to complicate the kinship system in Ngemba. In a related myth on the “Origin of Eternal Death”, one is tempted to conclude that the relationship between man, toad and chameleon on the one hand, and God and all animate beings, on the other is not only social but consanguinal, since the latter are God’s products and consequently share a very close relation. The consanguinity here is not physically blood related but mythic, since all the creations are products of God. Man, as well, shares affinal relations with the toad and the chameleon since there is some similarity in their character. What is common among them is that man like the toad or chameleon is avaricious, envious, lazy and wicked.

Most myths in Ngemba clearly define the kinship relation without much complexity. The myth in which the traveler marries the lover of a water nymph shows that the relationship between father and son is consanguinal, while that between the son and the dwarfish man is affinal. Other relationships in the same myth beside the above-mentioned consanguinal relations are affinal. A similar situation occurs in the myth where a poor boy marries the world’s beauty. The relation between the chief and the beautiful daughter in the above-mentioned myth is consanguinal, whereas that between the chief and his subjects or the girl and her suitors is affinal. Examining therefore the concept of markedness in relation to the kinship term, it becomes evident that consanguinal terms are unmarked in relation to affinal. Also less distant relations are unmarked in relation to more distant lineal kin. The relationship between God, man and other animals in myth is unmarked while that between man and the other animals is marked. In the myth where the poor boy marries the world’s beauty, the relationship between the chief and the daughter is unmarked whereas that

between the chief and his subjects, the daughter and her suitors is marked. In addition to the established norms which reduce the complexity in markedness as far as kinship terms are concerned in Ngemba, Harold Scheffler and Floyd Lounsbury in *Sirono Kinship: A Study in Structural Semantics* make kinship analysis less cumbersome by establishing five categories with oppositions which can easily capture the relationship of the kin terms. They are:

- (1) familial vs. non familial, any ego's genitor and genetrix plus those persons who share their genitor and genetrix with him or her; (2) lineal, i.e., direct ascendant or descendant vs. collateral;
- (3) one generation removed vs. same generation as ego; (4) senior generation vs. junior generation; (5) male vs. female. (100)

From the above, the establishment of kinship in relation to markedness becomes a less complicated endeavour, thanks to the avenues provided. It now becomes the critic's choice in selecting the analysis with the least possible problem for his task. This is so because of the difficulty of establishing a universal comprehensive model given that kinship in itself is not universal.

#### **SOCIO-POLITICAL FEATURES OF CHARACTERS**

The features here are hyponomic, that is, rank related (syntagmatic). What dominate here are political relations. The Ngemba society is highly structured with the *Kwifor*<sup>ii</sup> at the helm, closely followed by the Chief. This structure is reflected in most myths in Ngemba. As far as the hyponomic relation is concerned, it is important to note that it does not only end at the political level but extends into kinship relations (social aspects). Generally, the husband in Ngemba is the head of the household while the wife without any aberration takes a subordinate role. The husband in the myth "The Musician and his Magic Leaves" establishes his authority over the household. He places order before his departure for the musical concert. Although the woman violates his authority by not respecting hierarchy, she receives the consequences at the end when she dies without anybody besides her. The (patriarchal) set-up of the Ngemba society confines the woman to this subordinate role.

Politically, the chief is at the head of his subjects, though a subject to *Kwifor*. What is intricate about this hyponomic relation is that each role-played is defined within the cultural context of the myth. On this note, Franz *Boas* notes: "Culture was so powerful that it shaped worldview.... From the moment of birth, the custom into which an individual is born shapes his or her behavior and worldview" (Qtd Marcel Danesi 36). Within Ngemba, the people know who is who in all contexts. Social positions are gender-sensitive. Man, especially in Ngemba dominates public life, yet the women do not complain openly, since the custom has made it so. Men are present in all political and religious rituals and decision-taking, but when it comes to domestic life, the woman, especially in polygamous homes, dominates, as she is always present when the children are sick, hungry and so forth. Consequently, there is an asymmetry in some cases, what men can perform, the women cannot and vice-versa. With such a hyponomic relation the super-ordinate person is considered unmarked since he is nominative or paradigmatic. The chief becomes the only person to eat a particular species of animals or drink a special type of wine (as is the case in the Bafut myth on the *Nifo'o*<sup>iii</sup>, where the best wine is reserved exclusively for the chief). Also, among the Ngemba's the sole person to eat the gizzard of a fowl is the father, who is the head of the household, while the woman heads the kitchen, and is the person to taste the food first, when it is ready. The sub-ordinate person in each context is marked.

#### **ECONOMIC FEATURES OF CHARACTERS**

The economic features focus on the social division of labour. In Ngemba, men carry out some particular activities while others are meant for women. When these roles are interchanged, as might be the case in some households, the society sees both (husband or wife / man or woman) as outcasts (especially the man). Everyone endeavours to maintain his or her role as a man or woman. Some of the economic features include, climbing of palm trees, building of houses, hunting, going to long distances to work on the behalf of the family, childcare, furniture arrangement and maintenance, tapping of wine, clearing of farms, and hoeing of farms.

In Ngemba, hunting, climbing of palm trees, clearing of farms, building of houses, maintenance of furniture, travelling to distant places to work, tapping of wine are mostly masculine activities. While hoeing of

farms, cooking and childcare on the other hand are basically feminine activities. It is worthy to note that in rare cases or as a challenge, these roles are reversed. But when this happens, the society sees it as a weakness on the part of the man. Consequently, they become sources of inspiration to the oral artist. The myth, "Why God Gave the Ngemba Man a Machete and the Woman a Hoe", proves that the economic roles assigned to both men and women stretch back to creation. Similarly, the Ngemba myth on the extinction of the life giving leaf emphasizes the role of the woman as farmer. From all indications, the division of labour in Ngemba is spelt out (though there can be an inversion of order). Most often, those who violate this order are seen as cultural renegades, and consequently sources of ridicule in society. A certain woman in Bafut, who became a butcher, (an activity meant for men) was given the name "Sirri-cow"(contemporary legend) - Sirri being her proper name, and the "cow" an affix of ridicule. The markedness of these economic features shown above may be generally assigned in terms of their normativeness: some are hyponomic in relation whereas others depend on the value of the activity. The hyponomic relation and value create a state of superiority and inferiority or valued and less valued. Hyponomically, superior things or highly valued things within the economy become unmarked while lowly valued things or inferior things become marked.

In the myth, "The Origin of Deities" and "Why God gave the Ngemba man a Machete and the Woman a Hoe", God is seen as the producer while man plays the role of consumer. Because of disobedience eminent in the myth "The Origin of Deities", God abandoned the role of producer or provider and man was obliged to become a producer. The disobedience of man destroyed the amity between God and him. Enmity also developed between man and man as the rest of the village questioned those who disobeyed God by burying the corpse against God's will. Because of disobedience, man becomes helpless and destitute (a situation of lack is instated). This state pushes him to be self productive, because nothing was forth coming from God. The people lost his company and sharing. In "Why God Gave the Man a Machete and the Woman a Hoe", liquidation of this lack is introduced. Firstly, God provides a hoe to the woman and a machete to the man. Secondly, to feel the presence of God and bridge the gap, man starts creating deities, ("The Origin of Deities"), as God's representatives on earth. Subsequently, man moves from a deteriorated condition to an improved one, that is, from lack to liquidation of lack. Man's ability to live a partially happy life is again initiated by God's providence when he gives the hoe and the machete to man. Man on the other hand becomes an ordinary producer. God in turn plays the role of supervisor and guidance of producers. Although God creates a comfortable situation for man, he physically separates himself from the latter as access to God becomes difficult. This lack is liquidated once more by the creation of deities, and through constant prayers, libations and rituals. In this light, man's happiness is reintroduced through a relatively newly defined economic policy. This mythemic sequence (of lack and liquidation of lack) earlier used by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale* helps to show the chronology of events, and how transvaluation helps to establish a new order of things. In sum, considering the various types of features, every agent in myth can be represented by a certain paradigm, displaying the markedness and rank of those features. The syntagms represent the set of valuative relations among the various agents of myth. They indicate vectors of accord as well as conflict, but generally they provide a grid upon which valuative relations among the agents as defined by culture can be organized.

#### **ACTANTIAL LEVEL**

Vladimir Propp in his examination of the structure of narration in oral narrative bases his hypothesis on functions. He notes that paired functions are based on implications. For example, combat presupposes victory; interdiction presupposes violation and the like. Julien A. Greimas in *Sémantique Structurale* sees further than Propp. His preoccupation is not to reduce the numerous functions established but to devise a premise through which the narrative can be read as the transformation of a given state into its contrary. Many schools of thought acclaimed this proposal. The French *Groupe d'Entreveine* received it as the gospel of narratives. Paul Ricoeur, on his part in *Time and Narrative*, though overwhelmed by Greimas's analysis, sees some nuances in the method which can, however, be ignored. He points out that Greimas has not effectively or clearly stated the transition from the Semiotic square to the valuative function of narration. However, that was not his focus since his preoccupation was looking for a means through which the two folds of the narrative could be examined through the process of transformation. Despite the oft-mentioned criticism,

Greimas's proposals remain promising within the semiotic circles as it validates potentials of characters like that of the orphan girl in one the Ngemba myths, "The Orphan Girl and her Step Mother", who is a victim of torture in the hands of a transgressor (step mother) but suddenly ascends the social ladder because of honesty and obedience. Once more, virtue is rewarded. The theme of God's providence is introduced in the myth, through the breaking of a mysterious egg, which changes the fate of the orphan girl. Reversal of fortunes is echoed in the same myth as the daughter of the stepmother who has the superior position at home, and is always honoured, falls prey to wild animals, and ends up miserable, as she attempts to imitate the former, amid her pigheaded nature.

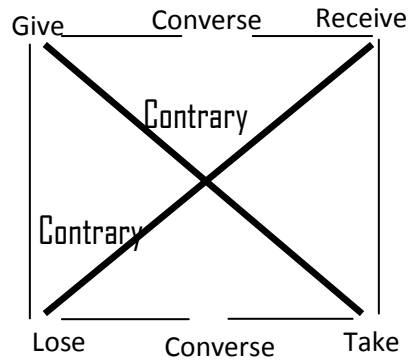
In addition, the beautiful girl in the myth about a water God that metamorphosizes and marries the most beautiful prince (negative heroism (NH)<sup>iv</sup>, because of pride, ends up in the hands of a metamorphosed water god. Her superior position turns out to be inferior as she ends up in a cave, and is almost starved to death. Her brandished pride at the beginning (as princess, a position highly honoured and cherished in Ngemba) takes her into the abyss of a cave. Finally, in the myth "The Origin of Death" and "The Origin of Eternal Death" (where we have the no-hero of zero thematic significance (NHO) and the no-hero of major thematic significance (NHM) hero-types, we realize that at the beginning, one of the negative heroes (NH) in both myth gives the impression of changing a situation from a deteriorated state to an ameliorated one - that man's situation as far as death is concerned can be improved. The NHO protagonist in this myth acts ignorantly and betrays the course. What is important is that, raised hopes are shattered, as situations remain the same or deteriorates more. The hidden flaws of these characters pilot things at this state. The antithetical character (NHM) in these myths hastens up the deterioration process. Man sees himself dropping from a superior to an inferior position. For example, in "The Myth on "The Origin of eternal Death", the toad (bearer of good tidings) would have relieved man from the impending doom of death, but his avaricious and wicked nature worsens situations, since the task is not accomplished. On the other hand, the chameleon (bearer of bad news) worsens things by sounding the gong of eternal death. If the Ngemba man is what he is today, it is partly because of the attitudes and actions of these two emissaries.

Examining the above from the syntagmatic and paradigmatic viewpoints, that is, ranking and markedness, it becomes evident that higher ranked or super-ordinate positions are unmarked whereas lower ranked or inferior situations are marked. Ranking refers to the social perception of something or a situation. The percentage difference between the set of features could therefore show the relativeness of the feature. Socially approved things rank higher than those which are not approved by the society. Hierarchy also plays an important role in ranking. In this case elevated figures are highly ranked than non-elevated figures. Emotionally, a smile is highly ranked than a frown. Liszka considers rank

as a measure of the feature's tendency to represent a certain stigmatism despite the composition of other features in its syntagm. One way to measure the rank of the feature is simply to determine the ratio between the total numbers of times the feature appears in a syntagm and the times the feature represents the target signature. (*The Semiotic* 76)

It is evident here that markedness is an evaluative aspect of a paradigmatic relation, while ranking is syntagmatic. Michael Shapiro once more confirms that "the ranking of diacritic signs with simultaneous syntagm is the syntagmatic counterpart of the asymmetry of markedness, since markedness is the asymmetry of paradigmatic relation" (80). From this perspective, positive heroes (PH) in Ngemba myths on the one hand change from marked to unmarked situations, (from lowly to a highly ranked status). Negative heroes (NH), on the one hand, range from unmarked to marked situations (highly ranked to lowly ranked); while all their antagonists and transgressors operate contrarily. In myths where we have NHO and NHM hero-types, the situation moves from bad to worse, with the NHM hastening the deterioration of things. This is the case in the myth "The Origin of Eternal Death", wherein the woman's actions towards God's ordinance worsen things and the final judgment of eternal death is passed. The markedness and rank here are evident but not clear, as is the case with purely negative and purely positive hero-types.

The above situation can be neatly summarized into a give and take situation in which giving and taking order the markedness and rankness at the actantial level. Liszka's diagram clearly spells out these situations:



(*The Semiotics*, 127)

Amid the give and take order markedness and rankness at this level, the importance or value attached to giving and taking is culture bound. For example, among the Ngemba people, life is more highly ranked than death. To a Ngemba man, giving birth and taking away death, are an act of higher axiological rank than the reverse. If the chameleon is always killed by Ngemba people or seen as a symbol of evil, and the toad always kicked each time it surfaces, it is because they endorsed eternal death at the expense of eternal life. The importance of giving and taking becomes a culturally defined concept. The controversy in Ngemba is that, taking the life of somebody who has caused an abomination (like having an affair with the chief's wife) or who has committed murder is once more axiologically ranked. In light of this, culture and context remain imperative in determining the concept of giving and taking and how ranking can be established.

After examining these sets of valuative differences both at the agential and actantial levels, it is important to see how they fit appropriately within the framework of the telos of myth, that is, the narrative plot.

#### THE NARRATIVE PLOT

Our focus here is on the manner in which Ngemba myths express the opposing tension shown at the agential and actantial levels and its possible transgression. Also, the consequential relations between mythemic sequences are clearly displayed at this level within a particular type, or depending on the myth in vogue. Consequently, the action performed at the actantial level is well coordinated in a comprehensive framework of a narrative type.

Northrop Frye's four mythoi in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* are very informative inasmuch as the narrative plot of myth is concerned. Frye displays different kinds of societies in his four mythoi (romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire/irony) and the order and hierarchy that exist between these societies. For him, each society can adopt any or all. Within a given society, at a given time and with specific characters, any of the above-mentioned change of power or hierarchy can be eminent. Extrapolating from the different societies and their different tensions in hierarchy, Frye comments on the four aspects of a central unifying myth and sees them as the different faces on which societies rotate. He writes:

Agon or conflict is the basis or archetypal theme of romance, the radical of romance being sequence of marvellous adventures. Pathos and catastrophe, whether in triumph or in defeat, is the archetypal of tragedy- Sparagmos, or the sense of heroism and effective actions are absent, disorganised or foredoomed to defeat, and that confusion and anarchy reign over the world, in the archetypal theme of irony and satire. Anagnorisis, or recognition of a newborn society rising in triumph around a still somewhat mysterious hero and his bride, is the archetypal theme of comedy. (192)

From the foregoing, these mythoi (a representative of varied societies) are strategies in fantasy and the narrative imagination used to portray the tension between the violence of a hierarchy that establishes order and / or violence in societies. These mythoi emanate from tensions present in the context of hierarchy within a given society. Any attempt in any society to disrupt the existing order of things or for any possible transgression creates tension as the existing power tries to restore its authority. The attempt in such societies



is usually to change the leaders from an unmarked situation to a marked situation in order to restore a new order. The new order will move from a marked to an unmarked situation. It is evident here that in comedy the stress is on the victory of the new order over the old (obsessive order) while in romance, it is the continuous celebration of the victory of the old (ideal order) over its hopeful usurper. In tragedy there is the observance of the decline of the transgressor of an inexorable order, as opposed to satire where the defeat of a hopeful order is reordered by means of articulating its absurdities or illusions. It is evident therefore that societal wrangling will persist if, according to Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process*, *Societas* and its institutions are not introduced everywhere to prevent the worst sort of violence from ensuing. *Societas* here refers to hierarchy born society or societies that give ultimate respect to any authority that be. René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* suggests that violence results from loss of hierarchy. Any society that advocates perfect equilibrium finally ends in chaos. Even in *Communitas*, hierarchy also exists. The only difference is that its hierarchy is highly contextualized and exchanged. Consequently, order is maintained in *Communitas*. Though hierarchy perpetuates violence, for peace to reign, there is a necessity for it. Myths therefore serve the special function of instituting strategies for the suppression of such violence and to propose a step towards an alternative society. Since there is that necessity for order, and if possible for peace to reign, the drama in society remains the mobility from marked to unmarked situations or vice versa. This mobility gives the myth a structure, for the existence of hierarchy purports the existence of its possible transgression and transvaluation. The preceding paragraphs therefore show how the valuative difference shown at the agential and actantial levels fits into the telos of myth.

The focus here is the strategies of transvaluation, that is, the defeat of one hierarchy by or victory over another as shown by Fyre's four mythoi. Once more, the analysis is culture bound. Before examining the narrative plot of most Ngemba myths, it is necessary to indicate that Ngemba is a *societas*. As a *societas*, total respect of hierarchy prevails.

The Ngemba society is highly structured. The hierarchization ranges from the cosmic, political, and social to the economical spheres. Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* rightly suggests that hierarchy is the foundation of strife (without ignoring the fact that perfect equilibrium in the society breeds the worse sort of violence). Most highly structured societies are not void of strife. Historically, the various chiefdoms and kingdoms that make up Ngemba rotate around the inversion of hierarchy. Despite the hereditary system of governance, people with no royal affinity have recorded their names on the royal list. In the Bafut kingdom for example, the leadership sceptre has changed hands several times (among different households). A similar situation has occurred in Nkwen to the extent that resistance at one moment gave birth to Menda-nkwe (a new Village). The transvaluation of hierarchy is sometimes organised through coups or through cosmic power as most myths suggest. Attempts at implementing order in societies with the hierarchical system of government either inverts the order of things or establishes a new order, creating the mobility from unmarked to marked situations or vice versa. This inversion of hierarchy does not end at the political level; it extends to the socio-economic domain where power changes hands even at the level of families or households. The underprivileged become privileged, poor families become rich, orphans become masters at home and the like. Most of these changes occur as a result of the transvaluation of power.

The orphan in Ngemba has often been regarded as a second-class citizen of no economic or social importance. His role in society is often misinterpreted. After all, what can a fatherless child do? According to most Ngemba proverbs, "an orphan swims only at the banks of the river" and "the game of the orphan child is usually divided "unskinned". These proverbs sum up the position of orphans in Ngemba. The inversion of things, that is, orphans evolving from their original marked position to an unmarked one, creates a new society as suggested in Northrop Frye's mythoi-comedy. All these happenings are reflected in Ngemba mythology. The myth therefore performs a transvaluative effect in which the principle of hierarchical organisation of actual society is inverted within the mythic framework, thus creating a new society. These tangled hierarchies suggest that indeed myths do play out the fundamental tension between the order-giving hierarchy and its possible transgression.

### THE NGENBA PEOPLE AND THE COSMIC POWER OF THE INFERIOR

The tangled hierarchy in the Ngemba myth "The Power of the Ring" results from the power conferred on the extravagant boy (protagonist) by the spirits that handed him the magical ring. The ring of providence, as it is called, inverts the social position of the extravagant boy. Although jilted by his parents and society, he becomes the most honoured. The ring does not only elevate his social status but also projects his political image. Though he has no trace of royal blood in him, the ring assists him in fighting out the legitimate king, who finally abdicates. Through cosmic power, the poor and disfavoured ascend the political and social ladders, thereby creating a new order of things. This new order changes the situation of the extravagant boy from a marked to an unmarked state. This movement is based on a lack and liquidation-of-lack scheme. The boy initiates lack through extravagance, which places him in a marked condition. This lack is liquidated through the intervention of the spirit that gives him the magic ring to establish a new order, a new order that violates the old. The extravagant boy ends up being the authority.

As earlier indicated, the orphan child has no place in the Ngemba society. This is worse when the orphan is female. In the myth, "The Orphan Girl and the Step Mother", the female child is considered as property, and of no value. Thus having only female children (especially a wealthy man) in a particular household is often looked upon as a curse. According to the Ngemba people "a good orphan is the one who is dead". The *raison d'être* for such an argument emanates from the fact that these orphans grow up exposed to all hazards in life, and so can never be seen as assets to the society. In addition, their presence creates misery. The orphan girl in the above-mentioned myth almost becomes a victim of infanticide, if not of her honesty. In the end, many prefer death. Their situation in the society remains totally marked as they live at the mercy of cruel relations. The honesty of the orphan girl automatically changes the order of things. She is assisted and directed by underground spirits towards her final destination. With instructions given to her by supernatural powers, her situation changes from worse to better. The marked situation in which she finds herself at the beginning becomes unmarked. Happiness becomes her portion after the transvaluation of things, and authority comes her way. The mythic importance of this orphan is seen in her endless quest to satisfy the antagonist, which finally leads to an inversion of power. The tension is both internal and external. Externally, relations to the old authority do all in their capacity to restore the old order. It is for this reason that anything done by this orphan is never recognized. As she struggles to establish herself (by doing her possible best to satisfy all), surprisingly, things work in her favour. Most often, virtue is rewarded and vice punished. The result of the existing tension between the old order and its subjects is the emergence of a new society. The suppressed take over the command baton. The emphasis here is on the victory of the new order over the old (comedy).

### DEMISE OF TRANSGRESSORS

Heroism is culture bound. The African concept of heroism is a bit different from that of the West. Just as Africans celebrate positive things in this world, they equally pay particular attention to bad ones. Many creation stories in Africa present man as a tragic being. At the beginning, as many African myths insinuate, everything was good, there was enjoyment everywhere, man was not supposed to labour and life itself was eternal. If Africa is what it is today, the greatest blame falls on the fore parents, who are architects of the present society. Amid the above, African in general and the Ngemba people in particular still perpetrate this state of things as they continue to commit the same errors, thereby reasserting that the present generation could not have done better if they were in the place of the old. The flaw in the character of Africans has shaped their lives and given them today's society. If Africans remain what they are today, it is because of the attempt at transgressing the original order purported by God. This transgression ushers them into a new society wherein, suffering is the rhythm of life, as there is no resurrection after death. If the existing or original order is God, with all his laws (that man should not disobey him), then the tension in the society comes from man's effort to deliberately transgress the existing order. The result is his demise.

This situation creates a new society where suffering reigns and there is no resurrection after death. This changes man's state from an unmarked to a marked situation or highly ranked to lowly ranked in the eyes of God. The myth, "The Origin of Eternal Death", introduces us to this concept of tragedy in African mythology. The myth rightly articulates that the beginning was good and life was eternal on earth. God (the authority in place) in a democratic manner never wanted to impose this form of life on man. He wanted man to choose

between resurrection after death or eternal death. Retaining the names of the people who participated in the duel (one of my informants said, if these people are known, their families will be eliminated right down to the least), the narrator craftily uses animals that share the same character traits as the people who performed the act. The toad and chameleon used by the narrator are prototypes of human flaws. The toad signifies the avaricious and wicked man while the chameleon stands for the wicked. Since the toad and chameleon are human prototypes, man's catastrophe at the end is not imposed. Attempts at being avaricious or wicked are attempts by man at violating the established laws of God. This transgression launches man into a new society characterized by suffering and no resurrection of the physical body. Man moves from an unmarked situation to a marked one. This struggle of mythic heroes orchestrated by their personal dictates to violate or transgress an inexorable law or norm or force, finally leads to their demise. The existing order is between man and man or man and a superhuman authority.

After examining the structure of narration of "The Power of the Magic Ring", I realized that there is ambivalence in the type of hierarchy proposed in it. The extravagant and lazy boy in the myth is rewarded at the end. The startling question is, which type of hierarchy is such a myth proposing, when hard working people, like the boy's brothers who are obedient to their father, are not rewarded, but power is given to those who do not merit it? Is it a society of lazy people that the myth is advocating? Myths of this nature transmit a transvaluation in which hierarchy is inverted or displaced in favour of the most marked member of the society. Although people admire the victory of the lazy and extravagant boy who becomes hero at the end, many see little in him but for the display of his supernatural power and his obedience to the supernatural figure that carries flames on his head and needs assistance. Most interpretations, however, are usually in favour of the existing hierarchy or the old order, since there is no particular cause of "dismantling the prevailing hierarchy".

When this myth was narrated, I realized that a majority of the audience was happy with the victory of the extravagant boy over an existing authority. This type of interpretation, extrapolating from C.S. Pierce's theory of determination, is forced or directed determination as opposed to legitimate interpretation. Determination, as indicated above, is the process of removing ambivalence in any work of art. From all indications, especially at the level of the interaction between the performer and the audience, the emotions of performer, his facial expression, and vocal quality showed that he had to wheel the audience in favour of the new order. But if there were shared discourse (determination) among participants, with no influence from anybody, the dogma of the narrator to favour the new order to the detriment of the old order would not have prevailed. There would have been much room for legitimate interpretation and of course, the ambivalence in the hierarchy would be questioned and consequently removed. As oft mentioned, there is no premise for a new order in a chieftom or kingdom if the old order is not wrong. Do people need to randomly use the power conferred on them? If this situation is well examined in a democratic performance context, then the audience will question the authority of the new order and advocate for the reestablishment of the old.

Ngemba myths, which serve as a base, therefore exemplify tension for reflection in the society. Since these myths mirror the society from all angles, room is opened for interpretation and of course, legitimate interpretation. This is because when interpretation fails, everything is reduced to dogma.

In a nutshell, the hero type classification adopted for this paper is very fitting as far as the structure of the narration of myths in Ngemba is concerned. This is so because myths are a representation of action, which as hitherto indicated, can be analyzed into a series of consequentially related (action) events. This action is piloted by heroes (of varied nature) and their antagonists. The fact that the adopted classificatory method takes cognizance of the whole text permits us to fully examine the agential, actantial and the narrative plot of the myths within the framework of Ngemba culture without any constraints. Thus, the analysis corroborates Daniel Chandler's view in *Semiotics: The Basics* that societies are simultaneously the geographical and historical reification (manifestation) of cultures, though the scope of his work is different from that of the present venture. Also, the different narrative types evident and discussed in the analysis, establish different valuative tensions, consequently showcasing the ground on which the Ngemba tradition anchors. Finally, the analysis also proved that Ngemba myths constitute a charter that supports tradition and status quo.

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<sup>i</sup> Atutu literally means "head head". It is a man that does not possess the other parts of the body but for the head. In the myth, he later on begs other human parts from neighbours to constitute a complete human being as he sets out for a contest to win the hand of the most beautiful lady in the village. All the parts are returned after winning the contest.

<sup>ii</sup> A secret society and supreme judge in Ngemba villages.

<sup>iii</sup> Nifo'o is the principal shrine in Bafut. It is believed that all the "missing" (dead) chiefs in Bafut resided there.

<sup>iv</sup> Drawn from Ademola O. Dasyilva's hero type and tale-type taxonomy criteria, wherein different types of heroes are clearly defined viz, Positive Hero (PH), Negative hero (NH), No-hero of less Significance (NHO), and No-hero of major thematic significance (NHM) otherwise known as the determiner of the theme. This classification foregrounds indigenous African philosophy and hermeneutics, which have served as basic cultural generative sources of the hero concept in Africa.