

Chart 1: Social and Economic Structure

Structural Units	Society			
	Limba	Mende	Temne	Vai
Economy	upland rice farming			
Household	polygynous virilocal family			
Local Community	village based on patrilineal descent group			
Polity	autonomous chiefdom			
Pantribal Sodalities	men's societies and women's societies			

1. Trickster Behavior and Tale Structure

In all four literary traditions two distinctive clusters of behavioral attributes characterize the trickster. In many tales the trickster behaves excessively and impulsively in the pursuit of selfish goals; in others, the trickster behaves moderately and rationally for shared communal ends. In these West African tales the first cluster of antisocial behavioral attributes include excessive greediness for food and – to a lesser extent – for wealth and sex and impulsiveness expressed in indiscretion and being easily deceived by appearances. For example, a tale present in Mende (Kilson: 157–159), Temne (Cronise and Ward: 279–280), and Vai (Ellis: 207–208) literary traditions tells how the gluttonous trickster planned a ruse which would enable him to attend feasts in different towns on the same day but failed to attend a single one. In the Mende and Temne versions of the tale, the trickster fails to get any food, because the feasts begin simultaneously and he is unable to move from the crossroads where he has stationed himself with a rope connecting him to a child in each village; in the Vai tale, the trickster misses the feasts, because assisted by flying magic he darts from village to village, arriving first too early and then too late to get any food. This tale is representative of trickster tales involving antisocial behavioral attributes in these Sierra Leonean traditions.

By contrast, the second cluster of positive social behavioral traits finds expression in generosity, moderation, and rational planning for some socially legitimate goal. A Mende tale, for example, recounts how a resourceful little creature succeeded – where all other suitors had failed – in winning a chief's daughter as his wife through a carefully planned deception (Kilson: 181–208). In such tales the trickster frequently acts to help others – by sharing food with them, by protecting them from danger, or by conveying valuable information to them. Thus, the cluster of positive social behavioral traits often is associated not simply with a socially legitimate goal but with a socially beneficial one.

Each cluster of behavioral attributes is associated with a different tale structure. In the tales in which the trickster behaves antisocially using deceit for some selfish end, he fails to achieve his goal and is physically or psychologically punished. Such tales often end with the trickster running away in embarrassment or being physically hurt. Whereas in tales in which the trickster behaves positively employing a

ruse for some social purpose, he is rewarded with the achievement of his moderate goal, such as obtaining a small basket of rice to share with his wife and children or outwitting a large predator to protect the community. In these Sierra Leonean trickster tales, then, antisocial behavior leads to failure; socially positive behavior leads to success. Consequently, although the outcome of tales invariably uphold the moral order, each behavioral cluster is associated with a different form of episodic or tale structure³. This pattern of association between the trickster's behavior and the form of tale appears consistently in all four literary traditions.

2. Pivotal Relations and Trickster Attributes

Trickster tales revolve around the relations between trickster and dupe. Occasionally, more than one such pivotal relationship exists in a single tale (see Chart 2). Various social relations constitute pivotal relations in the tales of different oral traditions. In all four literary traditions, the most frequent pivotal relationships in trickster tales are, first, relations between friends and, second, domestic relationships – between husband and wife and between father and child. Relations between uncle and nephew also occur as pivotal in several Vai and Mende tales; relations between chief and subject and between son-in-law and mother-in-law in a few Limba, Mende, and Temne tales (see Chart 2). Despite some variations in the pivotal relations in the trickster tales of different oral traditions, the majority of trickster tales in each collection revolves around relations between household members and friends.

Chart 2: Pivotal Relations in Trickster Tales

Pivotal Relations	Trickster Tales			
	Limba	Mende	Temne	Vai
Husband/Parent – Wife/Child	4 (29 %)	6 (19 %)	5 (15 %)	1 (20 %)
Son-in-law – Mother-in-law	1 (7 %)	4 (13 %)	3 (9 %)	–
Male Affines	–	2 (6 %)	–	–
Uncle – Nephew	–	4 (13 %)	–	1 (20 %)
Friend – Friend	7 (50 %)	10 (31 %)	16 (49 %)	3 (60 %)
Chief – Subject	2 (14 %)	2 (6 %)	6 (18 %)	–
Employer – Employee	–	1 (3 %)	2 (6 %)	–
Other (Asymmetrical)	–	3 (9 %)	1 (3 %)	–
Total	14 (100 %)	32 (100 %)	33 (100 %)	5 (100 %)

Mende: 29 tales, 3 with 2 pivotal relations

Temne: 27 tales, 6 with 2 pivotal relations

³ For a detailed discussion of Mende tales, see Kilson: 24–30.