

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/21958> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Aalders Grool, Marjolijn Cornelia

Title: Verbal art of the Fon (Benin)

Issue Date: 2013-10-16

3. The verbal art of the Fon: the performance witnessed

I will describe the event of the performance in this section. I consider the performance a way of speaking that intentionally entertains the audience. The story itself conveys a way of living that is exemplary. The performance conveys the dual sense of the artistic action and the artistic event (Bauman 1974: 290; see p. 34). One of the main features of the performance is the very orderly discourse. The performer acts naturally and vivaciously, yet the performance is amazingly flawless and elaborate. Listening to the recorded material makes clear that storytelling must be an acquired skill.

The present chapter surveys the main physical features of the artistic event. I will describe the key elements of the event: the setting, the performer, the art form and the audience. The description of the event itself is in terms of the schedule, time of day and location, and the seating during a session. I will describe the performers and the role of gender in the choice of different types of stories. Then I will pay attention to the interactive relationship between performer and audience. The chapter ends with the differences between the religious ceremonies and the performances of **hwènùxó**.

3.1. The setting of the performance

The performances only took place at a pre-arranged time. I arrived at the appointed hour, and parked my car at the outskirts of the village. A troop of children met my assistant and me, and together we walked to my hosts. In the village, a number of people were present to attend the event. They all shook hands with me, before walking together to an **apatam** to welcome me formally. An **apatam** is an indigenous cabin that is set up in a central location in the village or within a compound. The hut has a round shape. It has a one-meter high fence that is made of sawed logs. Several high branches in the fence support the cone-shaped roof, which is made from dried palm leaves. An **apatam** is a pleasant and airy room to stay.³⁰

After we entered the **apatam**, the clan's chief welcomed the guest with the traditional greeting **a fón à**, literally meaning 'Did you wake up?', that is 'How are you?'. I answered his question **en un fón** 'Yes I woke up', that is 'Thank you! I am fine!' and asked him the same question. The chief carried on asking after the health of my family and clan members, whether they were real or imaginary. At my turn, I repeated his questions referring to the same family member as the chief did. This so-called **mlan mlan**, 'praising', went on and on, and so we assured one another that our parents and grandparents were well, all our brothers, sisters, uncles, nephews,

³⁰ The chief of the clan or the village often owns an **apatam**.

aunts, cousins, all of them, even our ancestors, were doing fine. During this dialogue, we looked each of us the other steadily into the eyes. I failed only on one occasion, and blinked. The chief felt obliged to restart our greetings, and we started the complete dialogue again.

After this dialogue was finished, the second part of the protocol started. This part consisted of the libations to pay respect to the ancestors. One of the participants drew some fresh water from the well in the half of a round calabash. The chief took a sip, and poured out some drops on the ground to offer as libation to the ancestors. He handed the calabash to me, and I imitated his acts. I wet my lips with a small quantity of water, and ported my respect to the ancestors by pledging some water on the ground. Then one of the older women cupped my breasts with both her hands to check whether I was what I said I was, a woman.

I was told that the practice of praising was part of the formalities to be followed when an important guest visited the village. At my first visit to Ayou and to Abomey-Calavi, the practice of welcoming me as a foreign visitor was similar. I do not know whether this practice was strictly set up or partly impromptu. It was by no means a spontaneous event. However, after the praising, the hosts made clear that they enjoyed very much welcoming their guest. About half an hour after my arrival, the hosts seated the guest and her assistant, and the storyteller and everybody present sat down. It was performance time. The Tokoudagba clan in Abomey skipped the protocol, and the oldest woman storyteller immediately started her performance. There was a general feeling of tension that day, which gave me the impression that she deliberately left out the praising for not wasting our time.

Storytelling usually takes place in the evening after the working day is finished. This is at sunset, around seven o'clock in tropical West Africa. It is dark in the villages, except for a rare oil lamp. However, the practice proved different. Depending on the situation, stories may be told anytime. The three sessions in Ayou took place in the morning for the practical reason that the road to Ayou is a 'terre de barre' red sand path where a car can hardly pass at night. The session in Abomey occurred also in the morning.³¹ The sessions in Abomey-Calavi indeed occurred in the evening. The sessions lasted two to three hours, whether during the day or at night. It is obvious that Fon people themselves consider storytelling as a pleasant pastime in the evening, but that they are occasionally prepared to perform during the day.

Storytelling proved to be an activity in its own right. Storytelling is not a sideline that people combine with other activities, like grinding maize or cooking food. However, women performers exceptionally breastfeed their infants while performing. The whining sounds of a baby occasionally are audible on the recordings.

³¹ See 2.4.3.

The location of the performance

The location of the performance is one of the compounds within a village of the rural areas in the south of Benin. The compound is square space hedged with a fence, which holds a number of rectangular huts of dried mud brick that have a metal roof. The main hut has a terrace at the front alongside the longest side of the hut; the terrace has a roof of dried palm leaves. The chief's dwelling has a round *apatam* to gather the complete clan. There is a fireplace. The compound has also a hut intended for the ancestors where the clan keeps the *aséén*, the iron portable altars adorned with pendants and feathers, one for each ancestor.

The sessions took place at different locations depending on the weather and the time of the day. I gathered the corpus in the wet season. When it rained, the recording took place inside a hut, or at the covered terrace in front of the hut.

When the rain stopped, the performance took place outside a hut or in the *apatam*.

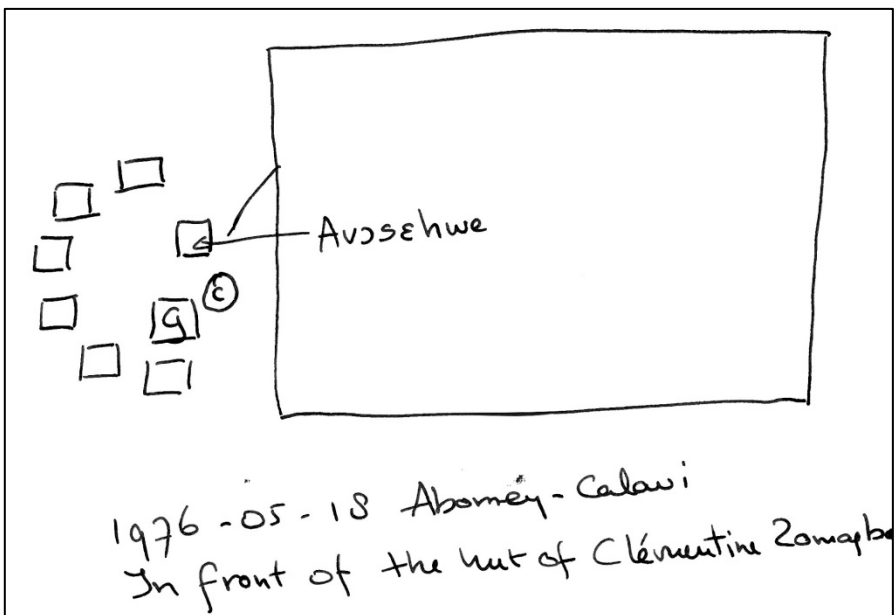


Figure 2 Seating in Abomey-Calavi

However, sometimes as time passed by, we went inside a hut. There is a difference between a session outside a hut and the sessions inside. The outside session seduces the walking passers-by to keep halt to listen. An inside session is more private, and hence rarely interrupted by a visitor.

The seating of the performer and the audience, of the guest and the assistant, was more or less similar during all sessions. The performer sat on a wooden chair. The hosts seated the guest on an identical chair, right across the storyteller. Figure 2 shows the seating in Abomey-Calavi on 5 May 1976, when performer **Avosehwe** told two stories (AC 7, AC 8). The consultants sat usually on a wooden stool at my right side in Abomey-Calavi and Abomey, which was practical, for it allowed them to brief me after each story. The consultant in Ayou, on the contrary, sat on my left side. Notice that Fongbe religious devices are the mirror image of the Yoruba devices. Ayou and its language are close to the Yoruba region and this influence shows in many details (see p. 21, note 7).

The audience sat on benches on the terrace when the performance was outside the hut and on a bed when the performance was inside the hut. Children sat on mats on

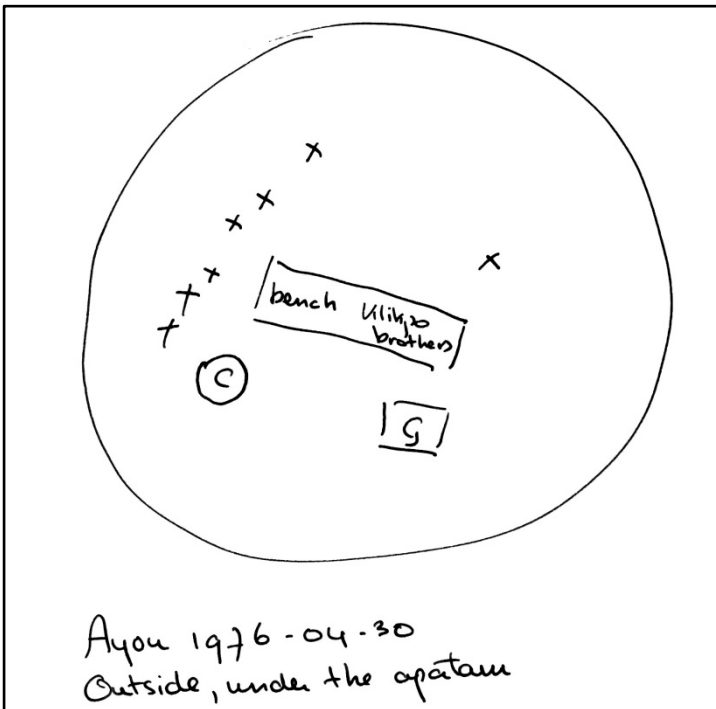


Figure 3 Seating in Ayou

the floor. During the sessions, I placed the cassette recorder within the circle of the audience, but between the chair of the performer and my chair, to be sure that I was the only person who was able to flip the switch. I did not ask questions during the performance, for I did not want to disturb the ongoing performance.

Figure 3 shows the seating at the **Klikpo** brothers' place in Ayou. The Klikpo brothers in Ayou were also traditional doctors. They had a special hut, that served to see the patients who wanted to consult them. They received me at the hut's terrace that had a fence of dried palm leaves. The second and third session took place inside their guest hut due to the heavy rainfall. The audience sat in a circle with the performer sitting on a chair; the guest, too, sat on a chair, while the assistant sat on a stool. The audience sat on wooden benches, and the children sat on mats on the floor.

In Abomey-Calavi, most of the recordings took place in the compound of the Zomagba clan, often outside, in front of a hut, but sometimes inside. On one occasion, the mayor required that the recording took place in his office, a two-storied house.

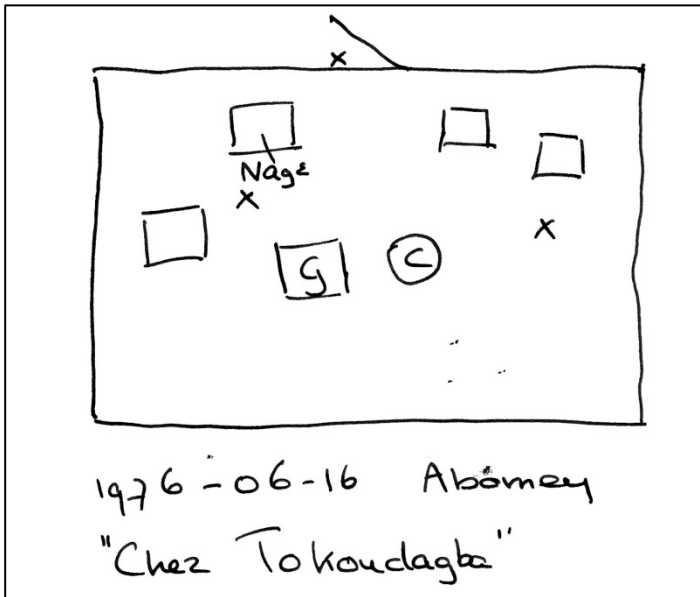


Figure 4 Seating in Abomey

Figure 4 shows the seating in Abomey. In Abomey, the first recording took place at the back of the office of the District Chief. The other recordings took place at the compound of the Tokoudagba clan, inside the hut of **Nage Tokoudagba**.

3.2. The performers

At the time of the recording of the corpus, there were families of storytellers in each village. These families considered performing an artistic profession that required a lifetime of practice to be an accomplished performer. The performers often told me that one was a storyteller at the age of forty, but that the best performers were in their late sixties (see appendix ‘Storytellers’ for details).

The corpus consists of stories told by both genders. Women told 21 out of 37 stories, and men told 16 stories. In this sense, the corpus differs from all the previous corpora of Fongbe verbal art, for it presents a majority of women performers. Earlier collections even state that all storytellers are men (Le Hérissé 1911: 255, Herskovits and Herskovits 1970: 6).

Two men performed the first eight stories that I recorded in Ayou. Both performers were in their seventies. The Klikpo brothers belonged to a locally famous clan of storytellers. The performers in Abomey-Calavi told 19 stories, of whom four women performed 14 stories. Members of the Zomagba clan told most of the stories in Abomey-Calavi. The oldest woman was 75 years old. This was Clémentine Zomagba, who was born in Abomey. She performed six stories. The other three women were nearly 40 years old. In Abomey-Calavi, two men told each a story, and one man told three stories. One of them was about 50 years old; he was a wanderer who journeyed a lot in Benin and its neighbouring countries. The other two men were much younger. One was about twenty years old, and the second one was in his twenties and originated from Ayou. He was a hand in Abomey-Calavi, and he was the one who performed at the mayor’s office. Members of the Tokoudagba clan told all the stories in Abomey. This family was well known for its talents, and yielded a number of artists in the field of performance and painting. The 81-year-old Nage Tokoudagba told four out of ten stories. Some of her next of kin attended the session, and a 50-year-old daughter told two stories and a son of 60 years told one story. After this, they presented a four year old granddaughter who recited a dilemma tale and a ten year old grandson who performed a trickster story while the audience helped and encouraged him.

Gender and Age

Let us consider whether gender plays a role in the performances of the corpus. The majority of the authors of previously published corpora mentioned that the performers were men. The Herskovitses apologized for the absence of women storytellers, which was based on hearsay that there were no women interpreters available. Konrad was the only woman author who was able to gather stories told by

women. She described the differences between men and women when telling the popular verbal art **gli**, the imaginative oral narrative:

Among the Ewe, both men and women performed tales. More often than not, however, men were the primary storytellers. Women tended to be more reserved and thus, contact with them was more difficult. Once they came forth and proper introductions were made, women proved to be very adept storytellers, although stylistically different from men. While men tended to be more animated, and told, in many cases, raucously wild and bawdy tales, women were more subdued and deliberate in their telling. Controlling their audience through measured pacing, they tended to pay more attention to character descriptions and the motivational aspects of character's actions. (Konrad 1985: 3).

The corpus consists of both comic and dramatic stories: all comic stories were told by men, while women only told dramatic stories. Nonetheless, performers sometimes wove a dramatic part into comic stories, or they whetted the audience's appetite by deliberately putting a spicy sequence into dramatic stories.

Dramatic stories tell about the lack of compassion for smaller beings, or the disrespect for life. Women dealt with misbehaviour, and the difficulties of life within a family. The stories told by women warned against the neglect of due respect to the ancestors or the forgetting of libations. These stories often refer to the importance of religious devices and the use of gris-gris (see 5.5.). Women tell also dilemma tales.

Men told Fongbe comic stories about the trickster **Yògbó**. This matches the description by Konrad that men tell the Ewe **Yiyi** comic stories (Konrad 1985: 3). The Klikpo brothers from Ayou performed also two trickster stories that pictured a different character as central participant. Men told stories about the huge gap between the vagant hunter and the sedentary king. However, men delivered also stories about the self-confidence and trust of the lonely orphan. Finally, men told stories about sexual harassment by women (AC 9, AC 11). These stories are probably an example of the so-called dramatized amorous stories that Herskovits mentioned, though he admitted that he was unable to collect them (Herskovits and Herskovits 1970: 10; see also chapter 7).

The performers did not explain whether gender was the reason that men tell trickster stories and women tell dramatic stories and dilemma tales. The explanation may be life itself. Divination and the consulting of **Fa** is a man's job, as is hunting and palavering. Women are responsible for raising the children and growing food.³² The **vodun** cult and its due sacrifices are a common duty of both sexes. It is probable

³² In the 19th century, the king's serfs worked on the field.

that the distinct tasks in the Fon rural society are the point at issue. Previous authors who interviewed men performers published several stories that are similar to those of the corpus told by women. This shows that the stories are part of the community, or rather part of a common past.

3.3. Gestures in performance: kinetics

Kinetics is the extra asset of the performer. I can only describe my impressions in this section, because my audio-recording device did not capture the gestures of the performers. Kinetics transforms the virtual actions into gestures that create a nearly touchable reality. Performers usually sit on a chair when performing. Performers love to bring a story to life for the enjoyment of the audience. They emphasize the performance through their gestures, body language and facial expressions. They move the upper part of their body, and they continuously gesticulate. Performers thrill the audience by adopting scenic elements like picturing the movements of the agent of whom they are talking.³³ They point their fingers at the agent, as if it is here with us, and show how it moves and where it is going. This underlining is easy to spot in the discourse, for the Fongbe grammar has a range of deictic markers, whether it is the stand alone deictic marker, or a combination of demonstrative pronouns together with the definite particle (see 14.2. Style). Some storytellers modulate their voice to picture the different agents, for example the voice of the coward husband in AC 2.

Performers try to capture the attention of the audience before starting the performance by saying a superfluous remark, for example: **égbé ɔ** ‘today’ (Ay 2), **din ɔ** ‘now here we go!’ (A 1). Once a performer started with the remark **é yá à** ‘is it ready?’ and he pointed at the cassette recorder (A 6). These remarks are followed by more specific remarks that concern the story, such as **d’ayí ɔ** ‘in olden times’ (Ay 4, AC 10), or the expression **xóxó d’ayí ɔ** ‘the words of olden times’ (A 6). Gestures accompany these remarks as well.

The performer of Fongbe storytelling does not read aloud from a book or an autocue. On the contrary, the performance gives the impression that the performer shapes the story on the personal mood of the moment and the reactions of the audience.

There is an apparent difference between the performance of Fongbe storytelling, and European storytelling. This stems from the gap that dissociates the oral character of performing from reading aloud. The performance is reminiscent of the performances by professional stand-up comedians and cabaret performers. The analogy with Fon

³³ See 5.3. Agents

performing includes a fine sense of timing and humour, and a continuous rapport with the audience.³⁴

3.4. The interaction with the audience

The performance of Fongbe storytelling traditionally takes place in front of an audience. The audience is not passively listening to the performer; it plays an interactive role. The audience consists of adults and children. The adults are often performers themselves, and wait quietly for their turn to perform. The interaction between the performer and the adult audience is part of the performance. The children in the audience are quietly listening. An audience that shows no reaction after the initial utterances makes a performer nervous. Once, a performer asked whether the audience wanted her to stop performing. The interaction takes often place to show approval of the performance, using the expression **ahên** ‘right so!’.

The audience participates actively in the process of storytelling, for example, by commenting on the words used by the storyteller. The audience angrily interrupted a storyteller, who was not a native Fongbe speaker, by saying: ‘Don’t say so-and-so! We say so!’ The audience also praises the performer either by roaring with laughter or by repeating the last utterance of the performer, who promptly joins in with the audience. When a performer delivers the peak of the story and gives a loud laugh, it often happens that the performer and the audience howl with laughter, and have a lot of fun. On the other hand, the audience uses interventions to encourage the performer, for example by intervening with a flash forward. The audience also interrupts the performer by asking superficial questions. I found the following questions and answers in the corpus: The performer said ‘This is the third time!’ Then the audience asked ‘Is this the third time?’ The storyteller answered: ‘I just said so’ (AC 2).

The performer told how the rim of the saucepot is greased with a sticky **bò** ‘gris-gris’ or ‘magic glue’. Then the audience said ‘Please, tell us: what is a ‘gris-gris’?’ The performer answered: ‘Well, you certainly know the ‘gris-gris’ (AC 2). Fongbe people credit a number of objects with magic power. These objects are called **bò** in the case of soap or glue. Diviners also give talismans and amulets that are called **bòcyò** in Fongbe and gris-gris in French.

³⁴ The similarity only accounts for the features of the performance, it does not account for the difference of content, or genre that separates verbal art from cabaret (see part 2). The performance involves a sophisticated use of stylistic devices (see part 4 Style).

When the performer mentioned the gift of a strong male horse, the audience asked ‘What is a strong male horse?’ The performer answered ‘The strong male horse from Hwawè’ (AC 3).³⁵ Another example of interventions occurs, when the audience comments on the denouement: ‘The saucepot reveals the secret!’ (AC 2). Interventions also show pity and compassion. When a performer mentioned that the leopard kills a kitten, the audience cried ‘She is heartless!’ (Ay 5). But when a performer told how the leopard kills her own cub, supposing that she kills a kitten, and added the comment ‘Can you believe this!’ the audience is laughing and cheering the kitten’s survival (AC 16). The interaction of the audience is part of the performance. It makes also obvious that the audience recognizes at least a number of elements and the topic of the story.

3.5. Ceremonies versus verbal art

I will first enter into the specifics of ceremonies, before embarking on the performance of verbal art. The Fon society has a number of different ceremonies and rituals to honour the gods and to celebrate important events from the past. These ceremonies also call to mind the ancestors who remain part of the clan (Agboton 1997: 42; see also p. 23).

Ceremonies and other special events take place during the day on the days when people do not work. In general, ceremonies are accompanied by music. The orchestra consists of several different types of musical instruments of which the drums play the leading role. Other instruments are the **agídígbó**, ‘lamellophone’, the **gan**, ‘iron gong’, and the **gò**, ‘gourds’ (see AC 10). The music continues as long as the ceremony itself takes, and this may take hours. Some of the ceremonies have a verbal art component, when the musicians beat the drums and the audience cheers for recognizing the tune of a song of a specific story. The function of dancing is to perform rituals as a part of the ceremonies. During the formal ceremony, the priests dance to honour the gods and particularly the ancestors. The ceremony of the ghosts for example is a ceremonial dance that takes a great part of the day. The dancers wear ritual clothes with richly ornamented garments, huge decorated masks, and leg- and footwear made of raw jute. The clothes and paraphernalia of the priests remind the audience of the gods they embody. Their faces are whitened with kaolin; however, they wear masks and are unrecognizable for the audience. Various drums accompany the dancers. The audience watches the dances for hours while chewing cola nuts to protect themselves against the ghosts. Dancing also takes place during a

³⁵ The horse refers to **Hwawè**, a village near Abomey where the kings of **Danxomè** bred horses. The horse also reminds us of the **sogan**, the minister who was responsible of the looting and collecting of wealth in the Kingdom of **Danxomè** (see 1.2.).

minor religious ceremony or a ritual for a specific god. The dances are performed by a specific group, for example by the new young priestesses who dance after having left the thicket where they were initiated into the cult of a god, as I was able to watch in Ayou.

The dress code is formal. The complete clan dresses up to celebrate the days of the ceremonies. Women wear gowns that are embroidered at the front and the neckline, and they have an elegant and intricate folded scarf on their heads. Men wear trousers and a gown, and the long **agbada**, a kind of antique toga over their shoulder. This toga figures in one of the Abomey-Calavi stories (see AC 3). Chiefs and diviners walk around carrying an ebony walking stick with a silver knob and their heads are covered with the typical conical Fon bonnet. After the ceremony and the libations are finished, it is party time. People enjoy the feast; they eat a lot, and drink imported alcoholic drinks.

Let us consider the difference between an after-initiation event and the ceremony of the ghosts. The dances are performed in the midst of the village. Life in the village goes on while the initiated girls dance. People stop for a glance at the dancers, they comment on the dancing, and walk on. This event only has a discrete audience. The girls who leave the thicket after their initiation are dressed up in the colours of the god in question. One of the favourite colours at these occasions is the colour red, though white occasionally occurs. For example, the **vodunsi** of **Xeviosù** and **Sakpata** I watched in Ayou were fully dressed up in several layers of wraps, some of them having a lace edging around their waist. They wore red-cropped tops. There was a heavy layered cotton belt tied around their breasts. Their heads were adorned with a red braided hair band. They wore several necklaces of red beads. Many garlands of red and white coloured cowries at their shoulders were crossed in front of their bodies and at their backs. Strings of white cowries were tied around their arms and ankles.

The Fon people have also specific groups that organize the dances at marriages and burials. People are fully dressed up when participating in burials and marriages. They buy yards of the same cloth to provide new gowns for the clan and the extended family. The women dress in robes embroidered at the front and the neckline, and they wrap a huge scarf around their head. The men wear an embroidered shirt and trousers, and a conical hat that is made from the same cloth.

The elaborate ceremonies still show traces from the elite culture that characterized the former kingdom. The main features are the jubilant dressing up of the participants, the crucial role of the priests and the rituals, and the ubiquitous part of the musicians and the dancers.

Let us now consider the sessions of performances of verbal art. These are an event in itself. The event is a way to relax in the evening, and to sit down to forget the strains

of the working day. The performance of storytelling has the function to entertain the audience by the way of performing. The story itself has an educational function. The event takes place at home. The dress code for storytelling is casual; neither the performer nor the audience is dressed up for the event. Fon people wear indigenous clothes. The women cover themselves in large wrappers that they wrap either around their waist or around their breasts. Some women wear sleeveless tops. The men wear often a loose-fitting shirt and trousers similar to a pyjama. In Ayohie, a number of men wore a medium-sized wrapper around their waist. The clothes are often made of the locally indigo dyed and batiked cloth. On the other hand, colours like for example purple, deep green or faded yellow dyed cloth are popular, as is the imported wax cloth from the Netherlands. Only one performer in Abomey-Calavi, originating from Porto-Novo, wore a tailored gown, and she had a scarf artfully wrapped around her head (AC 14, 16, 18). The Fon dress code and the performance in a seated position differ from the description of the Ewe comic **Yiyi** stories (Konrad 1985: 93). The Fongbe performers do not dance during a performance of storytelling in spite of what foreigners think.

Ceremonies are a celebration of the unity of the community that includes the ancestors. Two issues are crucial when it comes to perceive the distinct functions of ceremonies and the performance of verbal art in Fon society; these are the dress code and the fact that dancing is part of a ceremony. Unlike the ceremonies, the setting of the performance of verbal art is relaxed, and both the performer and the audience wear casual clothes. The performance is a speech event that focuses on the content and its presentation.