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## 15. Style in songs

The *hàn* ‘song’ discloses the denouement, and reveals how one of the agents violated a taboo or interdiction. The central participant sings the song to inform us about his efforts and to denounce the culprit. Performers decide whether they insert a song into the story, for the song is not obligatorily required. The corpus numbers twenty-three songs in total. Songs accompany 19 stories out of 37 of the corpus. The other stories in the corpus have no song, and only end with the denouement and the penalty of the culprit. On the other hand, two stories in the corpus have two distinct songs, and one story has three distinct songs (Ay 2, A 3 and AC 19). Performers may also add a different song to similar stories (AC 2, A 5).

The performers set the song apart from the story by melody and rhyme such as alliteration and assonance. Furthermore, the central participant uses direct speech to sing his lines, which is the opposite of the reported speech of the agents.

Language in songs differs from the narrative discourse. The statistical analysis showed that songs have relatively few pauses. Neither the pattern of pauses, nor the clause-final particle occurs in songs.<sup>109</sup> Songs contract words and eliminate vowels to mould the words into the melody of the song. Songs use the bare verb and convey the present tense. Two aspects occur: the future and the habitual aspect. The choruses of the songs in the corpus show two mood markers: an inhibition and an illusory wish marker.

The most salient feature of style in songs is the code switching in the discourse (Kossmann 2009, personal communication). The code of the songs differs from the narrative discourse. The main feature of songs is the use of formal and solemn language. The code switching shows also the use of loanwords from neighbouring languages. These words have a different code. The language consultant often told me that he was not capable of translating the songs, for songs are part of a ‘secret language’. This means that they convey religious knowledge that only initiated people understand.

Songs are often composed of stanzas that are distinct from the chorus. The Fongbe stanza consists of couplets or quatrains. The song in the story of ‘The sadist co-wife’ has four lines that is the form of a quatrain (AC 2). The song in the Abomey edition has a stanza of two lines ‘couplet’ and a chorus of two lines; the performer repeats the stanza couplets five times, adding a new first line at each repetition (A 5).

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<sup>109</sup> See also the scatter diagrams of pauses in chapter 9.

### 15.1. Grammatical choices in songs

Style shows in the usage of formal language in songs. Let us consider the following two examples that are from the two editions of ‘The sadist co-wife’. Agent A is worried about the central participant who is missing, and calls out ‘My darling saucepot! Frizzle! Sizzle!’. He does not answer by the usual **ɛɛn**, meaning ‘yes’, but instead he courteously answers by the polite **sɔ** meaning ‘to answer with due respect’, and he uses the anaphoric pronoun **hwɪ** instead of the clitic **a** ‘you’. This is how a daughter should answer her father, and how a wife answers her husband:

**sɔ      un      sɔ      hwɪ      sɔ      ɖò      hwan-yonu      ɖé      è**  
 answer CL<sub>1</sub>    answer ANA<sub>2</sub>    answer    be spoil-GEN-thigh    INDF    DEI  
 ‘I answer you with due respect, I answer with due respect from the back of that  
 jealous woman, look!’ (AC 2: 162)

The second example shows the use of the anaphoric pronoun **nyé**:

**o      nyé      nyí      nyé      nyí      nyé      nyíkɔ**  
 oh    ANA<sub>1</sub> be    ANA<sub>1</sub> be    ANA<sub>1</sub> name  
 ‘oh! It is me! It is me! I answer!’

**o      nyé      nyíkɔ      ɖò      hwanlé      xwi      yonu      è**  
 oh!    ANA<sub>1</sub> name    be    co-wife    quietly    GEN-thigh    DEI  
 ‘oh! I answer quietly sticking to the co-wife’s back, look!’

‘Oh! It is I! It is I! I answer! Oh! I answer quietly sticking to the co-wife’s back,  
 look!’ (A 5: 62, 63)

#### Mood: the Inhibition Marker

The central participant sometimes sings an inhibition. Inhibition uses a periphrastic construction of the inhibitive marker **ma** and the negative marker **ó**:

{**ma** + V      +      **ó**}  
 {**INH** + V      +      **NEG**}  
 ‘do not’

In this construction, the clause-final negative marker **ó** is always the last word of the utterance. Songs often use inhibition to underline the religious implications. The following example stems from an Abomey-Calavi story (AC 1). It shows the song and chorus of the central participant, the twittering trekking bird.

‘The hunter came home with two snails. His wife fried them and she ate them. When her husband wanted to eat something, she cut her genitals, fried them, and served

her husband. Then a small trekking bird jumped on the wall and started singing, jumping up and down. The hunter heard the bird singing, and though he understood what the bird said, he did not grasp the meaning the first time he heard the song.’  
[AC 1]

**ma** **ɖu** **ó**  
INH eat NEG  
‘do not eat!’

**ma** **ɖu** **ó**  
INH eat NEG  
‘do not eat!’

**ɖɔhun** **ki** **jo**  
similar press IP [sound of feet on the ground]  
‘there is something wrong!’  
‘Do not eat! Do not eat! There is something wrong!’

### Mood: the Wish Marker

Songs also use the particles **lé** and **ló** to convey a wish. The following example is from ‘The day to thresh the millet’:

**é** **nyí** **mi** **to** **mɛ** **l’alɔ-gan** **yaya**  
CL<sub>3</sub> say 1PL country LOC WISH-hand-GEN.iron freely

**na** **so** **li** **b’ɛ** **ná** **mé**  
FUT thresh millet CJds.CL<sub>3</sub> FUT be.fine

**é** **nyí** **mi** **to** **mɛ**  
CL<sub>3</sub> say 1PL country LOC

**alɔ-gan** **keɖé** **ná** **so** **li** **b’ɛ** **ná** **mé**  
hand-GEN.iron only FUT thresh millet CJds.CL<sub>3</sub> FUT be.fine

**é** **nyí’mi-le-tɔn** **lé.alɔ-gan** **yaya** **na**  
CL<sub>3</sub> say-LOG-self-GEN WISH.hand-GEN.iron freely FUT

**só** **li** **b’ɛ** **ná** **mé**  
thresh millet CJds.CL<sub>3</sub> FUT be.fine



## 15.2. The words in songs

The words in songs show that performers often use words that they borrow from other languages than Fongbe. These loanwords are often the language of a **vodun** in question. This is comparable to the initiation of new **vodun**-priests who learn to speak the ‘holy’ language of their **vodun** in the convent or the ‘thicket’. They have to relearn to speak Fongbe after they quit the thicket. The Fongbe songs from the Abomey-Calavi stories show words that are originally Nagogbe, Gungbe or Abomey-Fongbe. In the songs from Ayou occur Yoruba and Maxi words. Performers frequently call the loanwords the ‘secret language’, meaning the language that is only for the initiated men and women. A number of the songs in the Abomey-Calavi stories use Gungbe words, for example **tololo** for **trólo** ‘immediately’ (AC 9), **axóluvi** instead of **axósuvi**, ‘the king’s child’ (AC 9), or **fiye yoo**, ‘hot and white burning fire’ (AC 5).<sup>111</sup>

### Alliteration and assonance

Performers lavishly use alliteration and assonance in the choruses of the songs. The effect is spellbinding, as the following example shows:

**kpla-lala-ya**                      **hɔ-ya**  
 pouch-tear-old.woman    sagging-old.woman  
 ‘the shrinking and sagging breasts of the old mother’ (AC 19)

Let us consider the chorus of a trickster story where **Yògbó** makes a fool of the leopard. Even the termites make fun of the leopard in the chorus of their song. Notice that termites impersonate the ancestors. The termites save the leopard’s life; he is grateful to them and promises them that he will reward them with a rich feast. However, the day before they planned their party, the trickster unexpectedly arrives. He eats the food and drinks the alcohol. He leaves nothing for the termites that come a day later. They are too late, and sing a song that has the following chorus:

**kɔ**    **se**    **lélé**                      **kɔ**    **se**    **lé**    **kɔ**  
 sand    know    loud.high.voice    sand    know    drink    sand  
 ‘termites know how to pitch loud and high, termites know how to drink, termites’

**se**    **lélé**  
 know    loud.high.voice  
 ‘know how to pitch their voice loud and high’ (Ay 7)

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<sup>111</sup> The text of the last cited story uses the Fongbe **myò heè** ‘red fire’.

The chorus shows that the performer perceives the red-coloured sand as synonymous with the termites and their mounds. The chorus refers to the ‘drunken’ movements that an army of termites shows.

