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19. The concept of the storyboard

Let us consider the final issue, which is the technique that facilitates performers to make narrative choices. I discussed how the performers create the story in front of the audience by deciding on the appropriate sequence of actions. They improvise and concatenate chunks in the framework of the story. Nonetheless, they have an appealing stage presence that shows off an agile and professional performance. The technique that gives the performance a finesse that thrills the audience makes me think of a storyboard.

The way the performer creates the **hwènúxó** is best to describe with the technique of a storyboard. Originally, a storyboard is the first version of a film script that helps to visualize the sequence of scenes of a story. It consists of a series of panels that outline the major succession of actions (see 1.5.3.). The technique is widely used in the media industry. The storyboard is also used to describe all kind of processes as a succession of separate steps. However, the technique depicts all the successive actions, reactions, new facts etcetera that build the story. This makes it an appropriate metaphor to describe the storytelling process of the **hwènúxó**. Of course, this is a mental process for the performers. It is not a graphic organizer with real panels of rough sketches with instructions, arrows and pictures.

One may well argue that each panel of the storyboard coincides with a paragraph in the corpus (see part 3). Notice that the majority of literary analyses uses terms that are used to describe written or printed material, such as script and scenario. These terms imply that the performers wrote something down which was not the case. They made no notes; the majority of the performers was illiterate. I prefer the metaphor of the storyboard to describe the mental process of creating verbal art.

Let us consider each performance as an event in itself. It is a ‘configuration space’ that accommodates the central participant, the agents and their actions. This configuration space has the following properties: it is the set where the current story moves forward, while it also conveys the events from times past and the talking about these events.

I discussed how style visualizes the telling of a story (see chapter 14). Besides language usage, there is more to say about visualization. The performers focus the story and the timing in several key frames. On the one hand, visualization involves the positioning in the story. First, the pivotal positioning of the central participant increases his success. He is the decisive factor of the story. The performer contrasts the central participant with the pair of agents. The performer depicts the central participant as a sentient individual. Unlike the central participant, the agents have neither thoughts nor emotions. The performer depicts them as functions: they are a king, a hunter or an orphan. This way, the performer conveys what is happening and what is about to happen.

Nevertheless, the set-up of the storyboard is submitted to a number of rules. The performer first has to choose the following elements: the topic, the **Fa**, the agents and the referential and metalinguistic codes, as well as the central participant. That is the way that the performer defines the plot, or the sequential scenes. (S)he has to keep in mind the basic framework of the **hwènúxó** (see chapter 17). The successive elements of the framework determine a series of panels that the performer cannot ignore. However, the performers have the freedom to improvise. They may add panels, for example they may insert a scoop about a painful incident, after the introduction of the agents at the start of the story (see chapter 17). They may also freely link recurrent sequences after the peak. They also may add a song to the denouement. At the same time, the performer has to follow the rules that govern the structuring of the discourse, the use of pauses and the particle *ó* as well as the grammatical rules as described in part 3 of this book. Finally, the performer can add stylistic elements to each of the panels of the storyboard to keep the attention of the audience (see the chapters on style).

I gave examples of the use of referential and metalinguistic codes in completely different stories from different parts in West Africa in the previous chapter. The codes are widely spread. Therefore, I assume that the technique that I describe as a storyboard also travelled over the ancient trade routes where traders transported their commerce and staple food.

Verdier gets the credit for defining the Togolese story as the putting together of arbitrarily chosen adventures whose only relation is the ‘character who has the title-role of each adventure’ (Verdier 1973, II: 33ff.). The storyboard is a more explicit metaphor than ‘le conte à tiroirs’ that Verdier introduced in his analysis.

I may add that there is more than one relation.

The performance of a story is an improvisation that bases itself on a series of panels that together form a mental storyboard. The spread of topics and elements outside Benin, in a greater part of West Africa supports the assumption of the use of the storyboard technique. However, putting together all the elements to build a story and to apply the strict rules of language use makes the performance verbal art.