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Final remarks

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The main objective of this book is to understand the techniques and skills of the performers, and to find out how they structure the narrative discourse of the **hwènùxó**. I will first present the major conclusions concerning the nature of the stories. Subsequently, I will elaborate the interaction between the different approaches that I used and the way these results fit together and lead to the conclusions. Lastly, I will draw some conclusions on the performance itself.

There are ten main conclusions to be drawn.

Conclusion 1

The stories show many references to the former kingdom of **Danxomè** and the two major pantheons and their cults. The principle of duality is crucial. A great number of stories refer to the important role of divination. The stories reflect the diviner's devices that are important in the Fon society. It means that the stories often have an underlying meaning that is only understandable if one knows the meaning of the symbols that are used. The major topics are power and the violation of taboos. The performers say that the stories relate to events that happened in the distant past and to imaginary events that might have happened. The nature of the stories is religious, and they belong to the Fon belief system.

Conclusion 2

Each story features a central participant who impersonates the supernatural or divine power and who solves the problem one way or another. The central participant is actually the only character of the story, for the performer depicts him, unlike the agents, as a sentient individual.

All stories stage a pair of agents that illustrates the topic. They act as a vehicle that moves the story forward. The pair of agents is bipolar, like two sides of a coin. The agents portray functions in the Fon society. Agents have paraphernalia that refer to one of the **Fa**, a set of 256 religious devices that have specific religious properties.

Conclusion 3

The performers are free to choose his topic, the agents and the central participant as well as the way their features interact. At the same time, these features and the **Fa** that associates with them limit their liberty: the effects are predictable to the listener. Each performer can put together a performance by using variations on the features of the agents without changing the elements itself.

Conclusion 4

All stories develop a plot along a rudimentary framework of rhetorical devices. The performers in Abomey-Calavi and Abomey often use an opening formula to start the story. On the other hand, the performers in Ayou use a fixed formula at the end of the story. The framework consists of the peak, a repetition of the incident, the denouement and the end: the penalty of one of the agents.

Conclusion 5

The performer may choose to repeat the sequence that reports the peak just once. However, performers may also add digressions, and continue to tell up to three recurrent sequences of the peak. The performer is free to repeat a specific action or to make a deviation before arriving at the denouement. The performances show that it is up to the individual performer to extend the framework with manifold and multi-coloured variations within the requirements of the configuration space of the topic and the properties of and the agents. This free-for-all regime is left to the improvisation skills of the performer. Performers may add songs that give a moral explanation.

Conclusion 6

Similar stories have a similar topic, and an identical central participant and the same pair of agents. All versions of similar stories show the same rudimentary framework. However, each performance delivers a distinct story. The versions in the corpus are different editions of the story. Nonetheless, in the view of the performers the similar editions of **hwènùxó** are identical. It is plausible that the performers feel that the occurrence of a number of identical elements and codes define the story as identical.

Conclusion 7

Performers structure the discourse by a pattern of pauses and by the use of the clause-final topic **ǎ**. The performer applies specific rules to indicate new information. The performer also uses a wide range of stylistic devices to keep the attention of the audience.

Conclusion 8

The storytelling sessions that I recorded are events in their own right, in which the adult audience actively participates. The audience appreciates the improvisations and interacts with the performer to show approval. The performer may ask the audience for confirmation as well. On the other hand, the audience may intervene with cheers to encourage or the audience reacts with cries of horror. These performances are no part of a religious ceremony.

Conclusion 9

The **hwènùxó** are improvised performances, that are not based on written texts. The **hwènùxó** are either dramatic or comic stories. The gender of the performer defines the nature of the stories. Women performers told the dramatic stories, men performers mainly told comic stories.

Conclusion 10

Hwènùxó is part of the West African verbal art. It is an indigenous mythological genre of the Fon from Benin. It conveys the Fon belief system and its practices, such as the divination and the consultation of the oracle **Fa**.

One of my basic assumptions was that storytelling was an ad hoc performance and not a show based on a written text. I therefore decided that a multi-angle approach was required to analyse these stories. The approach involved an ethnographic and a linguistic approach, the description of style in language, as well as the analysis of the technique of the performer to create the performance. I gave a systematic overview of the results in an orderly series of chapters. However, the coherence and interaction between the results of each of the approaches remained underexposed, for the results of one analysis influenced the outcome of another analysis in many ways, either by limiting the options or by confirming an interpretation. I will sum up the most salient results.

The timing of the length of pauses between utterances and the frequent use of the particle **ǎ** are one of the most striking features when listening to the recordings. I started to analyse the discourse by analysing the pauses between the utterances. The interpretation of the graphical representation and the underlying statistical analyses showed that the performers use a pattern of pauses. This pattern is the main content marker of the narrative discourse. The understanding of the timing greatly contributed to the understanding of the story and the translation of the story into an English text. Furthermore, the performers are structuring the discourse by a multifunctional use of the particle **ǎ**. The particle is used as a clause-final marker to convey the end of old information and the announcement of new information. The particle is also used at the end of a noun phrase as a definite marker to track and trace the central participant throughout the story. Finally, the particle is used to topicalize one of the agents.

At the same time, the ethnographic approach made it possible to acknowledge roles and symbols in the stories and to understand the religious meaning.

Performers also use extensive pauses to highlight rhetorical phenomena. This made it clear what the performers considered as the peak of the story and allowed me to find the basic framework of the stories.

The linguistic analyses provided a wealth of tools used by the performers. The linguistic analyses also showed that there is a distinction between the formal Fongbe grammar rules and the language usage in performance.

The similar stories in the corpus allowed me to find the elements that they had in common, and why they were still different stories. This in turn led to the insight that identical referential and metalinguistic codes elements can be found in otherwise completely different stories.

The corpus has about 57 000 words. This enabled me to do a number of different analyses. It would not have revealed so much of itself as for this multi angle approach.

The final question is, how does the performer create the performance? One of the main features of the performance is the systematic structuring of the discourse. The performer alternately gives the floor to one of the agents. The performance is an improvisation that gives the impression of a spontaneous creation in situ. It is quite the contrary, the traditional framework of the **hwènúxó** and the language usage support the improvisation. I found that stories from various parts of West Africa have identical referential and metalinguistic codes to the Fon stories from Benin. This brought along the assumption that a performer uses a mental storyboard.

The storyboard technique is a metaphor of the performer's thing when creating the performance. The performers choose the panels that they mentally perceive as the scenic sequences of the story. First, they choose a central participant, a topic and a pair of agents. Thereafter, they arrange the features of the central participant and the elements of the agents that they need for the intrigue. They subsequently create a mental panel for each of the steps in the story. In other words, they create the story by concatenating chunks in the performance. Conclusively, the achieved performers fill up the rudimentary framework with improvised digressions that fit in with the features of the central participant and the elements of the agents.

The performers use techniques that show that they master the art of communication. They use the techniques that we know from the diverse fields of stand-up comedians and anchors, but also from literature. The combination of techniques that, in our eyes, belong to different genres makes the performance of verbal art so attractive.

The performance brings to mind the present-day TV-soap series. The features of the central participant, the elements of the agents and the use of rhetorical phenomena visualize the story and its intrigue. This is how the stereotypical features of the characters in a soap series predict the next scenes of the soap. The performance itself

resembles the performance of the present-day stand-up comedian who masters the skills of drawing the audience's attention and succeeds in keeping it. This keeping of attention is close to the efforts of TV-producers who want to maximize the number of watchers of their soap series. Their success is identical to the success that Fongbe performers of verbal art used to have.

The performance of verbal art from the Fon of Benin reflects the Fon society and its traditions. The performance requires a thorough knowledge of the **Fa** cult. It also requires the skills to take into account the rules and the codes and to deliver a narrative that the audience appreciates. The performance of **hwènùxó** is an elaborate art.

