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**Title:** Verbal art of the Fon (Benin)

**Issue Date:** 2013-10-16

## **Preliminary remarks**



## Preliminary remarks

One of the books I read before arriving in present-day Benin was ‘Tristes Tropiques’, written by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss who argued that the ‘savage’ mind has the same structures as the ‘civilized’ mind. Indigenous peoples may be illiterate, but that does not forestall them from proficiency in elaborate and characteristic art forms (Lévi-Strauss 1980). I came to Benin in February 1975 to stay there for about two and a half years.<sup>2</sup> I was very interested in indigenous verbal art. Hence, I started learning Fongbe in the summer of 1975. Fongbe is a Gbe language of the Kwa family (Williamson and Blench 2000). After five months of lessons, I spoke sufficient Fongbe to go to Cotonou’s markets on my own. I was told that life in the rural areas strongly differed from life in the towns of Porto Novo, Cotonou and Parakou. Storytelling was said to be extinct in the urban neighbourhood. I would have to look for it in the rural areas. It was about time to get out of town and to visit the rural areas in the south of Benin.

As a foreigner, I had to ask the Security Minister the authorization to travel. I got the documents in due course, and I travelled to the villages Ayou, Abomey-Calavi and Abomey. There, I collected the corpus between April and June 1976. I recorded the performances of 37 texts of Fongbe verbal art on consumer audiocassettes. I completed the transcription and a first translation into French during my stay in Benin. I digitized the originally analogue recordings in 2006. Several stories in the corpus are similar to those collected and translated by French colonial functionaries in the first half of the twentieth century. The size of the corpus is about 57 000 words. The spoken texts approximately comprise 12 000 utterances. The quantity of the data together with the digital recordings allows examining and analysing the performance and its elements, as well as the grammatical and narrative aspects.

The main objectives of my research are to understand the techniques and skills of the performers, and to find out how they structure the narrative discourse of the Fon genre **hwènùxó** (see chapter 7).

Let us first consider the performers. Six women told 20 stories, seven men told 15 stories, and a young girl and a boy each told a story. The 15 performers of the corpus were illiterate, and they did not have any notes for help. Nevertheless, all Fon performers delivered a very elaborate performance of a story. The performance made the skills of the performer manifest. Especially the septuagenarian performers were very accomplished storytellers.

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<sup>2</sup> The country’s name became Benin on 26 October 1975. Until then it was known under its colonial name Dahomey (see p. 40).

One of the main features of Fon performance is orality. Verbal art is a spoken discourse, in which written texts are absent. The Fon performer is keen on improvisation in storytelling. This improvisation has nothing to do with the European practices of recall or reproduction. The performer unexpectedly inserts new clues in a story, and the story takes shape during the performance. The cheering reaction of the audience makes clear that the audience appreciates unexpected new turns. At the very first session in Ayou, I noticed that the performer sometimes started a new development in the story with the single word *éé* that he set apart by a long silence. Even if one does not speak Fongbe, one realises that the meaning is ‘then’, that the performer announces a new phase in the story. The silence creates suspense, and therewith affects the audience. The silence is also part of the performer’s strategy to think about ‘What am I going to say next?’ The performer is shaping the performance by the use of silence, ‘timing’; hence, it is opposite to the wordsmithing of the writer.

The performance of Fongbe storytelling is a stand-up performance that the performer stages without showing any hesitation. The performance itself makes the delivery of the society’s heritage so delightful.

### **The nature of the performance**

One might entertain the idea that the discourse of an oral performance resembles the discourse of a book. In fact, when it comes to performance of a story, the difference between the delivery of speech and written text becomes obvious. The performance is an on-going process that leaves no time for introspection, and the audience immediately reacts and provides an interactive incentive. This process of creation and interaction widely differs from the process of writing and reading. The writing of a, e.g. scientific, book is a process in which the author works on his own by doing research and writing the book. Reading a book is also a lonesome affair. The reader is free to read and re-read a book. A reader may turn over the pages and use techniques as close reading to understand and interpret the writer’s intentions.

Add to this that still many people consider the oral performance inferior to the printed book. The Nigerian writer Chinweizu made a point in his critical review of the prejudice that the African urban elite holds against ‘oral and folk’. His plea for more attention to the oral performance of the artists in the villages who are still planting, harvesting and hunting is based on the estimation that these tales represent some 95 % of the fiction of the African continent. Chinweizu found fault with the narrow-minded Western mind-set when he stated the following:

Eurocentric literary academics, in and outside Africa, have long been prejudiced against oral works; against works in African languages; against

works by anonymous authors; against works by and for the non-elite ‘folk’; against works of ‘impure’ or ‘applied’ literature which address themselves to social issues of the moment. On the other hand, they have a strong prejudice in favour of written works; in favour of works in European languages; in favour of works by named individuals; in favour of works by and for members of an elite; in favour of works of ‘pure’ literature which are said to divorce themselves from ‘local’ and ‘social’ issues and to aspire to ‘universality’ (Chinweizu 1988: XX-XXI).

Let us finally consider the general definitions of folklore to understand the nature of **hwènùxó**. The concept of folklore should be given careful consideration, in view of the diversity and adversity of the many descriptions and concepts with regard to folklore. Several monumental studies of oral recitations provided us with descriptions of folklore in distinct parts of the world, but they often have nothing in common. Approaches widely differ. Some emphasize the aesthetic quality of folklore, while others describe the structure of the plot and the functions of the characters. Dundes described the immense beauty of folklore (Dundes 1972). On the other hand, Propp showed that the morphology of Russian folktales has a ‘universal’ storyline (Propp 1958).

Anthropologists customarily refer to indigenous stories as folklore. Bascom proposed the concept of verbal art as a definition (Bascom 1955: 245). Important forms of verbal art are myths, legends and folktales. Bascom considers verbal art as a sub-type of a broader class that he calls prose narrative. The prose distinguishes the stories from other forms of verbal art such as for example proverbs, riddles, ballads and poems on the basis of strictly formal characteristics (Bascom 1965: 3). In my view, the corpus that I recorded is part of the verbal art of West Africa.

### **The analysis of verbal art**

Anthropologists as well as linguists developed many ways to describe and to analyse the data of their fieldwork. A random survey of the numerous publications shows the diversity in approaches, in line with the authors’ objectives, background, insights and preferences.

Let us first consider whether there is a specific literary theory that we can use to analyse the stories of the corpus.<sup>3</sup> In other words, which method is appropriate to account for West African verbal art? Since the early example of Aristotle’s ‘Poetics’ literary theories took shape in the field of rhetoric and eloquence (Aristotle 1995).

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<sup>3</sup> The word ‘theory’ is widely used to indicate a descriptive analysis; in my view, either ‘framework’ or ‘model’ is more appropriate in the field of discourse studies.

After the French revolution, the debate got a more ideological veneer. Nowadays, there are as many theories as there are ideologies, and most of these are restricted to their ideological frames (Ducrot and Todorov 1972: 336). Moreover, theories that exclusively focus on one specific genre are bound to the features of that genre, which makes them hardly applicable to the analysis of a different genre. The studies in postmodern narratology focus on the prose of the novel (Herman and Vervaeck 2005: 107ff.). This framing makes narratology inappropriate to analyse indigenous stories.

A number of publications offer an appropriate concept to approach verbal art as a performance. One of these particularly deals with the African continent. Finnegan gets the credit of having written a survey of 'African oral literature' (Finnegan 2012). This seminal publication discusses the 'oral' nature of the African unwritten literature and gives many examples of the various genres in different parts of Africa. Finnegan discusses the various forms of poetry, prose narrative and songs that occur on the continent.

In the sixties of the last century, two distinct groups of academic men took interest in the theories of the pre-war Prague School, especially in the publications on stylistics and poetics by Jakobson and Mukárovsky (Jakobson 1960; Mukárovsky 1970). Their approach is rooted in the theories of the Russian Formalists, the linguistic theory of Saussure (Saussure 1972), the theories of the Prague School, including Jakobson, and the anthropological works of Lévi-Strauss, who coined the word 'structuralism'. In France, Europe, several scholars of different disciplines aim at formulating a semiotic theory. The group is called the French Structuralists (see pp. 35f.). At about the same time on the American continent, several folklorists and anthropological linguists also become followers of the pre-war Prague School and Jakobson. They aim at formulating a descriptive theory of the ethnography of speaking. The theory should account for the patterns of language use across speech communities of human groups. Bauman aims at the explanation of culture patterning, the fact that individuals are oriented to participation in several and overlapping speech communities (Bauman and Sherzer 1974: 16).

Structuralism and Ethnopoetics both provide us with a framework of concepts that is helpful to describe the performance of my stories. Therefore, I consider the above-cited approaches and their concepts appropriate to discuss the performance of storytelling. One of the most remarkable features of the performance is the alternation of utterances and silences. The description of the corpus must incorporate this alternation. The performer speaks utterances that often are just a part of a clause. One single utterance or a set of utterances, or even two sets of utterances convey a meaning. Here, Austin's concept of 'speech act' seems to be the appropriate approach to transcribe the performance into the utterances of the performer: "What we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech

situation” (Austin 1962: 138). Therefore, the transcription of the performances into written text certainly is a matter of theoretical consideration, for the transcription must report the details in the oral production of the utterances that the performer delivered. However, the performer also addresses the audience by making gestures, and the audience sometimes interacts with the performer by showing approval or by making additional remarks. Notice that the recordings of the corpus have limits in so far that they are audio– instead of video–recordings. However, the studies on transcription are few in number, for the majority of studies in folklore focused on the content of the stories. The publication by Serzisko is also very helpful to tackle this issue. Serzisko described the discourse of the Ik, a people from northeast Uganda. He bases his description on the segmenting of speech acts by pauses. He considers the pauses as the essential criterion to note how native speakers segment narrative discourse (Serzisko 1992: 4).

Since people live on our planet, they tell stories. Orality is the main feature of storytelling. The objective of my book is to analyse and to describe the performance and the discourse of Fongbe storytelling. However, the majority of modern literary theories explicitly accounts for written and printed material.<sup>4</sup> Storytelling principles apply also to non-fiction narratives, as the television anchormen and –women show us every day when they cue their interviews. They also apply to online presentations (Hart 2011: 7). Therefore, we should not limit ourselves to the linguistic and literary instruments but think out of the box, and also look into techniques that the media world and the creative industry use nowadays.

### **The actual analysis**

Today one can hardly imagine the patience that was once required to write down a story, or the imperfection that goes with it. The introduction of tape recorders facilitated the access to indigenous storytelling. Nowadays, the increasing possibilities of hardware, such as laptops and smartphones, as well as dedicated software facilitate the digital recording and saving of material in the field. The invention of new software led to a wide array of new analysing techniques. However, information technology as such does not enable one single method to come to a coherent synthesis. The big advantage is the digitization of the recordings, which allows for a far more detailed analysis than in the past. It permits to measure the use of time by the performer and to use graphical representations to analyse the storytelling process, in addition to the literary and linguistic techniques.

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<sup>4</sup> These theories and methods of analysis must be distinguished from studies in conversational analysis and theories on drama and comedy that study scenarios.



A study of the performance of Fongbe storytelling has to account for the nature of the stories, the transcription of the stories, and the ‘things’ that the performers do. Henceforth I will describe and analyse the corpus from this perspective by using a multi-angle capture. This has the advantage that I can use several concepts from different fields when I try to find the answer how the performers deliver an elaborate piece of art.

The description and analysis of the corpus is deductive, as Barthes requires (Barthes 1966: 2). It must account for the event as well as for the speech of the performance.

Therefore, I used the following angles. First, the performance is described as a cultural event that happens in a specific context and that conveys particular elements. Secondly, a linguistic approach and a statistical analysis are used to analyse the structuring of the discourse. The structuring of the content requires an analysis of the way of speaking of the performer. The description of style requires a linguistic approach as well. Finally, I analysed the performance by comparing different versions of similar stories told in different villages by different performers.

The first angle consists of an ethnographic approach that describes the event within its cultural context. The ethnographic approach deals with two perspectives, that is the point of view of the foreigner ‘from the outside’, as well as the points of references ‘from the inside’ that provide us with the cultural landmarks of the stories. I consider the performance a speech act within the rural Fon community that is meaningful with reference to relevant contexts and settings. The performers called the stories of the corpus **hwènùxó**. The performers said that **hwènùxó** are stories that happened in the past or stories that might have happened in the past. This leads to the following kind of questions: What is the background of **hwènùxó**? What is the nature of **hwènùxó**? What is the setting of the performance? The description of narrative elements leads among others to the following questions: What is the world of the stories? Who are the characters? What are the issues? What is the genre?

The second angle is the linguistic approach that describes the structuring of the discourse. Here, I consider the performance a well-formed speech event that the individual performer delivers to meet approval with the audience. The following questions have to be considered: What are the features of the speech event? What other features can be found? Is there a pattern in the timing of the performer? What is the structure of the narrative discourse? Are there specific grammatical constructions? Together with a linguistic approach, a statistical analysis is used to analyse the structuring of the discourse with the pauses, the utterances and the speech rate as parameters. The structuring of the content requires an analysis of the way of speaking of the performer. The analysis involves as well the language of the discourse as the production of the successive events of the story. I will also discuss the way of speaking of the audience in terms of interactions and interventions. Unfortunately, I

cannot compare the recordings and transcriptions of the corpus to other material, because neither Fongbe recordings nor transcriptions are publicly available.

The third approach is the description of the style elements and the stylistic devices. The following questions are considered: Are there specific figures of speech? What are the most frequently used stylistic devices? What stylistic devices have the character of a general rule? What style elements are personal choices?

The fourth angle is the analysis of the narrative performance. Questions to consider are the following: Do the stories have an underlying framework? What are the cultural and metalinguistic codes? What is the quintessence of the creation of the performance of storytelling?

In order to analyse the performance more closely, a number of individual versions of similar stories are compared in order to see whether the performers tell identical stories or whether they use identical elements to deliver a different plot or whether they improvise and make up the story during the performance with well-known ingredients and unexpected additions.

Together, these approaches will lead to an understanding of the creation of the performance. Questions to be answered are: What are the elements the performer uses to create a performance? Is there a universal morphology or storyline in **hwènùxó**? Is the performance a recalled reproduction of a well-known story?

Chronologically, I transcribed the stories in 1976 before I made a first manuscript of the segmenting of the utterances in 1977. I restarted the research for this book in 2006. The first step was the quantitative analysis of the pauses and the segmentation of the utterances. This analysis led to the understanding of the occurrence of the definite particle **ɔ** as a final clausal particle that indicates the start of a new paragraph in a tail-head construction. The particle also functions as a definite marker that introduces the central participant. The performer places it at the end of a noun phrase to track the central participant. These results were most helpful in understanding the content of the stories. They greatly helped in gaining insight in the roles of the agents and their properties by analysing the Fongbe transcriptions and the French glosses. However, to make it easier to understand the stories, one should have some insight in the religion and in the role of the creatures that figure in the stories. Therefore, in this book, I will first explain the cultural and religious background of the stories, before embarking upon the structuring of the discourse, the figures of style, and the analysis of the performance of Fongbe storytelling.

### **The successive chapters**

The book is composed of five parts. The first part gives a survey of the event of a storytelling session, its background and the recording. The first chapter gives an

overview of a number of ethnographic publications about the former Kingdom of **Danxomè** and an overview of previous publications on Fongbe grammar and Fon verbal art and publications on stories and storytelling. The chapter is completed with an analysis of the basics of stories, and a discussion on the semiotic theory of the French Structuralists and the American ethnology of communication. Chapter 2 describes the project of the recording of the corpus in the rural areas of the South of Benin. Chapter 3 describes the event of the performance and the aspects of the performance. Chapter 4 concludes part 1.

The second part describes the elements, topics and genre of the corpus. Chapter 5 describes the elements of Fongbe stories, such as the role of the central participant, the occurrence of religious devices, and the role of the pair of agents. The main topic of the stories concerns power and power relations, which I discuss in chapter 6. Chapter 7 deals with the genre of **hwènùxó**. I will discuss the conclusions of part 2 in chapter 8.

The third part presents the analysis of the structuring of the discourse. I will describe the pauses by which the performers segment the narrative discourse in utterances and silence in chapter 9. Chapter 10 presents the multi-functional use of the definite particle **ḡ**. The particle is used to determine nouns as well as clauses. I will describe the way of speaking of the performer in chapter 11. The occurrence of direct and reported speech, the use of rhetorical phenomena, and the production of the successive events will be discussed. Chapter 12 finishes part 3 with the conclusions on the structuring of the discourse.

The fourth part gives a survey of the stylistic devices that the performers use in the narrative. Chapter 13 deals with the grammatical choices. The use of words is described in chapter 14. In chapter 15, the stylistic devices of the songs are discussed. The conclusions of the fourth part are reported in chapter 16.

The fifth part of this book analyses the creative process by which the performer creates the story. I will analyse the basic underlying framework that characterizes the stories in chapter 17. Chapter 18 describes the clues to find the referential and metalinguistic codes. In chapter 19, I will finally explain the concept and the technique of the storyboard, as well as the use and practice of the storyboard by the performers.

I will present my final remarks and the general conclusions in chapter 20. The stories as well as the English translation will be published in 'Voodoo stories of the Fon (Benin)' (Aalders Grool 2013 b).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Forthcoming at the end of 2013.