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Part 1: The event, its background and the recording

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In the first part of this book, I will give a survey of the event of a session, its background and the collection and recording of the corpus. The first chapter gives an overview of the huge number of ethnographic publications about the former Kingdom of **Danxomè** and an overview of previous publications on Fongbe grammar and Fon verbal art. The chapter continues with a discussion of several publications on stories and storytelling. I will complete the chapter with a discussion of the basics of stories, and a discussion on the semiotic theory of the French Structuralists and the American ethnopoetics. I will describe the project of the collection and recording of the corpus in the rural areas of the South of Benin, and the situation in Benin at that time in chapter 2. I will discuss the event of the performance and the aspects of the performance in chapter 3. Chapter 4 concludes part I.

1.   Benin: history, religion and verbal art

Before embarking upon the narrative and linguistic features of the corpus of Fongbe stories, I will give an overview of the many publications about Benin and the Fon people who, in the past, often were called Dahomeans. These publications pointed out the historical and religious elements that come back in the stories of the corpus. The chapter presents a short overview of the history, culture and religion of the Fon people, based on historical and ethnographic publications. This chapter also gives an overview of the available Fongbe grammars and textbooks. I will give an overview of the publications about the verbal art of the Fon people and those about neighbouring cultures. Finally, I will describe the basics of stories. I will discuss the semiotic model as proposed by Barthes and Eco, as well as Bauman's ethnopoetic approach of performance as action and event (Barthes 1964, Barthes 1966, Barthes 1970, Eco, 1966, Bauman 1974, Bauman 1978, Bauman 1986, Bauman 2002). Finally, I will give a brief overview of the storyboard technique that I will use later in this book to explain the creation of the performance.

1.1.   The history of present-day Benin

The history of present-day Benin is extensively described since the 17th century. Benin has a remarkable past, which dates back long before the French colonial administration dominated the country for seventy years. Many European travellers visited the kingdom and wrote about their "adventures". The descriptions vary from historical to ethnographic studies. They consist also of specialist research on the institutions at the royal court in the upland capital Abomey. After independence in

1960, the Republic of Dahomey adopted the gallicized name of the kingdom, though the territory of the republic exceeded that of the kingdom many times. In 1975 Dahomey was renamed Benin.

King Agadja established the kingdom in Abomey in the 18th century. The Fongbe name of the kingdom was **Danxomè**, meaning 'in the stomach of the god Snake'. Early publications show that visitors were amazed to see that the Kingdom of Abomey was a highly organized society that consisted of military, administrative and religious systems. The outstanding bas-reliefs on the walls of the palace in Abomey are still a tacit witness of that era. The historical and ethnographic study 'The Fon of Dahomey' gives a comprehensive overview of the publications hitherto (Argyle 1966). Argyle studied eye-witnesses' reports amongst which one by the Dutch humanist Dapper 'Description de l'Afrique' (1668), the one by the Scottish slave trader Archibald Dalzel 'The History of Dahomey' (1793), and one by the explorer Richard Burton 'A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahomey' (1864). All these authors described the life at the Dahomean court, including the slave trade, the female army of the Amazons and the yearly 'Customs'. Verger described the slave trade in the Bight of Benin. The Kingdom of **Danxomè** was one of the bulk traders of the region. From the 17th century the kings of Abomey initiated raids on their neighbours, such as the Nago and the Maxi (Argyle 1966: 8ff.). From about 1740 onwards, slave trade was the key to the kingdom's economic prosperity. The King's warlords started wars to capture their neighbours, and traded the captured human beings as a commodity (Verger 1968).

The Kingdom of **Danxomè** was situated within the borders of the present Republic of Benin. Between the 15th and 19th century the kingdom increased its territory and became a very powerful realm in the region. The kingdom that the French called Dahomey started as the tributary state of the Adja Kingdom to the Bashorun of the Oyo, a kingdom of the Yoruba Empire in present-day Nigeria. The kingdom nursed its resentment against the Yoruba and watched for an opportunity to throw off the hated yoke of the Oyo oppressors. Finally, in about 1822 King Guezo successfully declared the independence of his kingdom, and stopped the yearly taxes of '40 men, 40 women, 40 shotguns, 400 loads of cowry and coral' (Glélé 1974: 94). Until then the Oyo were the largest suppliers of slaves in the region, but the Dahomeans subsequently surpassed them by far.

The 19th century was the apogee of the kingdom under the reign of the kings Guezo and Glele. Their perception of kingship transformed the Kingdom of **Danxomè** into a strictly organized theocracy and a military nation. The administration was built as the mirror of the pantheon, where all deities were pairs, like two sides of a coin.

The British government abolished slave trading in 1807. Throughout the 19th century, the West-European governments abolished slave trading one after another.

Brazil, on the contrary, refused to abolish slave trading until 1888. The king of **Danxomè** defiantly persisted in maintaining a close collaboration with the many Brazilian slave traders along the coast. He proclaimed one of them Vice-Roy of Ouidah, after the place in **Danxomè** from where the slaves were shipped. The kingdom refused to make the transition to growing crops (palms) and to exploit palm oil. The British author Bruce Chatwin voiced the history of the kingdom as follows:

> In the nineteenth century the Kingdom of Dahomey was a Black Sparta squeezed between the Yoruba tribes of present-day Nigeria and the Ewe tribes of Togo. Her kings had claw marks cut on their temples and were descended from a Princess of Adja-Tado and the leopard who seduced her on the banks of the Mono River. Their people called them 'Dada', which means 'father' in Fon. Their fiercest regiments were female, and their only source of income was the sale of their weaker neighbours. (Chatwin 1980: 1).

The king was the only person in the kingdom who had a divine status. He had the power to decide about life and death. He was the heir of his subjects, and he controlled the slave caravans from the north (Argyle 1966: 11ff.). The king alone had the right to decide about the life of the captured peoples at the yearly 'Customs'. The king also decided which of the gods of the captured slaves should be incorporated into the kingdom's pantheon and cults in order to calm their latent anger. The Third French Republic conquered the kingdom in 1894, after a war that took two years. The Kingdom of **Danxomè** was incorporated in a new country that was called the Republic of Dahomey, and became part of the French colonial territories until the independence of 1960. The French administration installed new chiefs in the villages. This brought along a new hierarchy and new tasks (Désiré Vigan, personal communication, 1976). This shift of power resembles a description of what happened in the Lyela territory in Burkina Faso (Steinbrich 1995: 94). Nonetheless, the influence of religion remained as dominant as before, especially in the rural areas of Benin.

The French left in 1960, and the independent country "La République du Dahomey" was a fact. The start of the young republic was hopeful, but the country soon became politically unstable. Until the seventies of the last century, the structure of the local administration as well as the social fabric in the rural areas remained largely intact, despite the French colonial rule and the successive governments of the independent republic. In 1972, a group of young officers pushed aside the triumvirate that had made up the presidential council until then. From that day, a revolutionary military government governed the republic with Mathieu Kérékou as president. In 1975, the administration changed the name of the country into "La République Populaire du Bénin" (RPB): the People's Republic of Benin. President Kérékou announced that a communist revolution would change Benin to end "l'exploitation de l'homme par

l'homme", the exploitation of man by man. The administration became a 'scientific Marxist-Leninist state system' that used the rhetoric of the communist revolution, as the following slogans show: "Comptons sur nos propres forces" – We should count on our own strength; and "Mobilisons-nous pour la production" meaning "We should optimize our food production".

It took until December 1989 for President Kérékou to give up the Marxist-Leninist system. An economic crisis preceded this transition. Almost ten years later, a UNDPreport openly and explicitly described the harsh situation during that period and the need for a change to transparency and responsibility (PNUD 1998: 30). A national conference was organised from 19 to 28 February 1990. Chair was Monseigneur De Souza, the archbishop of Cotonou. At his instigation, a temporary administration was installed before elections took place. In 1991 presidential candidate Nicephore Soglo promised to lift the ban on the **vodun** religion for reasons of his own. Elections were prepared, and on 21 March 1991, Nicephore Soglo was elected as president. He re-installed the **vodun** cults and divination took up its substantial role in Benin (Agboton 1997: 61ff.; see also 1.3. and 2.1.). Several publications describe these events and the political changes (Banégas 1994, Elwert-Kretschmer 1995, Mayrargue 1995, 2002; Bierschenk and Sardan 2003).

1.2.   The organisation of the Kingdom of Danxomè

One of the characteristics of the culture of the Kingdom of **Danxomè** is the principle of duality in the royal administration (Argyle 1966: 76). The concept of duality originates from the successive pantheons that are worshipped in the Kingdom of **Danxomè** since the reign of King Agadja. The important dignitaries of the administration of **Danxomè** were made up of pairs. The main rule at the court was that each dignitary controlled another dignitary, and viceversa. The pairs were a perfect balance of countervailing power: each function had restrictions that were added to the power of the paired function. Altogether, there were seven ministers at the court of **Danxomè**. All ministers were men. However, a woman counterpart supervised and controlled each of them.

The principle of duality was ingrained in the royal court of **Danxomè** in numerous ways. The king governed together with the **migàn**, the prime minister and regent, and the **mɛwu**, the minister of external relations and chief of the king's house. The **migàn** and the **mɛwu** were to a great extent complementary antipodes. The **migàn** sat on the right hand of the king, and the **mɛwu** sat on the king's left hand. The place of the ministers was also a symbolic position; the right and the left hand had a specific connotation in the kingdom: right meaning 'wise', and left meaning

'powerful' (see also Appendix 2 A 4: 153, 155, AC 16: 16 and p. 91).[6] The **migàn** was the spokesperson of the commoners who was authorized to address the king. The **mɛwu** was the king's linguist who spoke to the commoners, since the king did not deign to speak to them (Argyle 1966: 72). The kingdom was a military state; to that end, two more ministers sat at the right hand of the king: the **ganhun**, the minister of war, and his assistant the **kpɔsu**, meaning 'leopard's man'. In total four ministers sat at the king's left hand: next to the **mɛwu** sat the **ajàxo**, the **tɔkpɔ̀** and the **sogàn**. The **ajàxo**, 'voice of Adja', was the Minister of Cults, the chief of the priests and priestesses, and the chief of the intelligence services. The **tɔkpɔ̀** 'the minister in charge of the king's confiscations', was the Minister of property– and rural taxes. The **sogàn**, 'chief of the horses', was the Minister of war loot (Garcia 1988: 22). The horse is an item in several stories; it is a symbol of power and wealth (AC 3, AC 8, AC 10). I will discuss the topic of power in chapter 6.

A daily religious observance showed the institutionalized regime of the theocracy. The king daily consulted two ministers on the will of the gods and the advice of his personal guardian spirit. The first dignitary was the **ajàxo**, the chief of the priests and priestesses. The second dignitary was the **bokɔnɔ̀**, the diviner and traditional doctor (Garcia 1988: 23).

The king was the only inhabitant of the kingdom who had the privilege to live in a **singbo**, 'big house', a two-storey palace (Garcia 1988: 22, 31). The architecture of the royal palace in Abomey made the duality visible. The king's forty wives and their children lived in separate huts around the palace. Furthermore, the firstborn out of one of the king's marriages or relations had no birthrights. One of the prerogatives of the reigning king was to choose the heir to the throne and to settle his successor (Mondjannagni 1977: 117; see also Ay 2). The palace was a place of formality. Life at the court was complex and full of intrigues and hatred among blood relatives.

The labour force was also highly organized in the kingdom. On the one hand, there were the free commoners **anatɔ́**, the fathers from Nago. The king considered the commoners as his property; they were called **Fɔnnu**, 'members of the **Fɔn** ethnic group'. On the other hand, there were two distinct categories of labourers: the **kannumɔ̀**, 'slaves', and the **glési**, 'hands of the field', the serfs who were farm workers. Notice that both words show that labour was considered an occupation with very low esteem. Slaves were caught as war loot amongst neighbours, or they were bought from Hausa, Bariba or Nago traders (Garcia 1988: 31). Both men and women could become a slave to the king or they were sold to foreign traders. Some of them were sacrificed at the yearly ritual of the 'Customs'. Slaves and their

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[6] A refers to Abomey; AC refers to the village of Abomey-Calavi; and Ay to Ayou; see Abbreviations.

children remained property of the king. Serfs were men who sold themselves to work in the fields and to eat what the fields produced. Their children were free men and women. A number of stories of the corpus refer to the violent and oppressive living conditions of slaves and serfs (see A 1, AC 3, AC 6, AC 14).

The communication within the kingdom and with the outside world was maintained by means of **wɛnsagun**, the king's messengers. They always had to travel in pairs to check each other in order to ensure the accurate repetition of the king's message. Their heads were half-shaven, and they were eunuchs (Burton 1864: 117; Argyle 1966: 68). They travelled with the king's sceptre. These messengers are mentioned in a number of texts of the corpus (see Ay 1, AC 4, AC 9, AC 10).

1.3.   The Fon traditional religion

In the rural areas of Benin, the **vodun** religion is part of the society; it has nothing to do with an individually cherished faith. Despite the French colonial rule since the conquest of the kingdom in 1894, the **vodun** religion is still the common religion in the seventies of the last century.

The **vodun** religion of the Fon people is primarily an affirmation of the existence of a supernatural world. It is grounded on a structured mythology and an extremely elaborate doctrine. It comprises a system of diverse procedures for being in communication with the after-world. (Kerchache & Delmas 1986). The religion is also a socially embedded belief system that consists of a vital set of subsets of all things created, including men, animals, plants, ancestors and gods (Agboton 1997: 61). The **vodun** religion of the Fon people has its roots in Western Nigeria and **Danxomɛ̀**. The pantheons of the Fon from Benin and those of the Yoruba from Nigeria have much in common. They worship some of the deities under a different name, but their attributes and rituals are rather similar[7]

The history of the Fon people regularly shows a change of pantheons, as Argyle amongst others described (Argyle 1966). The successive kings of **Danxomɛ̀** all made changes in the pantheon. The kings imposed their own gods over the peoples they conquered. Nonetheless, they were also careful to surround the royal throne with the gods of the defeated local populations. The pantheon was extended with each conquest of a neighbours' territory. The idea was that the incorporation of new gods in the existing pantheon would mollify their mood towards the conquerors. However, a god that became too popular was also a good reason to adjust the pantheon (Augé 1988: 17ff.). These changes entail the co-existence of several distinct pantheons. Maupoil provided us with an extensive description of the Fongbe

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[7] The Yoruba deities are still venerated in Haiti.

religious pantheons and the role of divination (Maupoil 1988). He conducted his research mainly in Abomey, the former capital of the Kingdom in the thirties of the last century.

I will describe two dominant pantheons that also figure in the corpus. The first pantheon is the pantheon of the elusive deities as the Moon goddess **Mǎwù**, the West, and her counterpart, the Sun god **Lisà**, the East. Minor gods or **vodun** are surrounding **Mǎwù** and **Lisà**. All gods are two of a pair to ensure the balance of countervailing power. Each acquires its significance from being the opposite of the other. The **Mǎwù-Lisà** pantheon has a linguist, their youngest son **Lĕgbà**. He speaks all the languages, those of the gods and those of the human beings whose markets he protects. **Lĕgbà** is the messenger between **Mǎwù** and all the **vodun** 'gods', as well as between the human beings and the **vodun**. **Lĕgbà** himself has a dual personality, for he is also the troublemaker, the god of disorder, quarrels and accidents (De Souza 1975: 53ff., Maupoil 1988: 352).[8]

The pantheon of **Sakpata** is the second pantheon that I will describe. He is the god of the earth and the water; his twin **Xɛviɔsù** is the god of the sky and the fire. The Fon people consider the firstborn of twins as the spy who is ordered to go ahead by his twin brother. Hence, they consider lastborn **Sakpata** the 'elder' twin, which is the most important one. His firstborn brother **Xɛviɔsù** is considered the lesser of the twins. This brings about that **Xɛviɔsù** is jealous of **Sakpata**. Like each pantheon, the **Sakpata** pantheon has a number of 'adjunct' gods. These gods are always paired. **Mǎwù**, who is the prehistoric deity in this pantheon, gave the control of the rain to **Sakpata**. She fears that the god of the sky may abuse his power and will burn life on earth. **Sakpata** is often represented as a hermaphrodite; he is as well a man as a woman. His tasks are also twofold: he gives fertility and protects life on earth, but he inflicts smallpox as well. The pantheon changed over the centuries, but the intrigues remained part of it.[9]

The **vodun** are the intermediate gods that go between human beings and the goddess **Mǎwù**. The Fon people consider the **vodun** 'gods' as spirits that gave many gifts to humanity. **Vodun** are also called fetish: "Les divinités des nègres avaient été baptisées du nom de 'fétiche' d'après le mot portugais fèitiço" (Verger 1957: 27). This translation is inappropriate according to Beninese authors (Mondjannagni

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[8] Actually, the Fon gods are the mirror image of the Yoruba gods in the sense that the East in the Yoruba cult is the West in the Fon cult. The Yoruba god Moon is the East, and the god Sun is the West. The Yoruba influence is visible in the habits and language of the village of Ayou that is near the Yoruba region; see for example p. 56. Roman Catholic Fon people identify the Moon god with God, and the Sun god with Christ.

[9] Herskovits considered the twin gods as the eldest sons of the gods Moon and Sun (Herskovits and Herskovits 1970: 126ff.; Herskovits 1938, vol. 2: 132ff.)

1977: 119). The **vodun** are immaterial spirits that are intangible. 'Fetishes' are the sacred objects which embody the spirit or the force of the god. They are not the spirits itself. Fetishes are items as stones, plants, pieces of iron, anthropomorphic statues, wooden sticks and so forth. Foreigners offensively called these objects 'gris-gris', and associated them with witchcraft. Anthropomorphic statues of all sizes are called **bocyɔ**, 'statuette' or 'talisman'.[10] At the entrance to every village, **vodun** made of red clay are set up. They have cowry eyes and an erect penis, and represent the god **Lĕgbà**. The dwelling is fenced with palm branches, objects topped with a small mound of sand and knotted grasses. These are clear signs that touching any of these objects will anger the **vodun** who were called upon. Indigenous artists who are highly respected, carve the **bocyɔ** statuettes. They use all kinds of material, wood, iron, cord, tissue and so on. They are sometimes quite elaborate pieces of art (Kerchache & Delmas 1986).

Neither **vodun** nor spirits are called by name. Only the name of the place where a spirit may stay is mentioned. An iroko tree for example does not impersonate a spirit, but a spirit can temporarily live in the iroko. This aspect is vital in understanding the stories of the corpus.

The cult of the **vodun** religion has three main aspects: the sacrifices to the gods by the individual villager, the divination and the rites. The priests who devote themselves to a **vodun** are called **vodunsi**, 'wives of the **vodun**', by the Fon people. The **vodun** gods are fear inspiring; they have to be pacified. Hence, human beings have duties and obligations to the **vodun**. Every villager has from time to time to sacrifice food to the deities and thus to show humility.[11]

A second aspect of the cult is the **Fa** divination. The Fon people are still known to consult the diviner in order to solve a problem or to make a decision (Agboton 1997: 61ff.). The oracle **Fa** is the personification of destiny. Fon people believe that if anything bad happens to an individual, a **vodun** may be displeased. This **vodun** expresses his dismay to the **vodunsi** who consults the diviner **bokɔnɔ̀**. The diviner is capable of connecting to the supernatural world to consult the oracle **Fa** in order to get to know the help of **Sɛ́**, the 'guardian spirit' of an individual person that symbolises the power of the supreme god **Mǎwù**. The divination is performed by casting nuts on a tray that is sometimes beautifully carved. **Fa** indicates the sacrifice or the prayer that the **vodun** requires. Maupoil described the sixteen symbols of **Fa** that together have 256 combinations of which each has its specific meaning (Maupoil 1988). Maupoil also described the devices and objects, the stories and taboos that coincide with the different symbols (see 5.5.). He also pointed out that the cult of **Fa** stems from the Yoruba cult of Ifa, from Ife in Nigeria (Maupoil

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[10] See AC 3.
[11] See AC 9.

1988). De Souza gave a graphical representation of the combinations (De Souza 1975: 95ff.).[12]

The religious rituals and ceremonies form a third aspect of the **vodun** cult. People felt that the distance between themselves and the deities was not fit to live with, and so the cult of the deified ancestors developed. As a result, the number of rituals and ceremonies increased to the veneration of the family ancestors **hɛ̌nnuvodun**, and the ancestors of the clan **akɔ̀vodun** (De Souza 1975: 22).

Ceremonies are the rituals that establish communication with a god who is incarnated in the possessed dancer. A messenger announces the ceremony by playing the iron Fon double gong. He gathers the villagers at a special place at the outskirts of the village where the ancestors' altars are kept. The priests who will conduct the ceremony follow behind the messenger, and sit down while waiting for the audience to be seated. The audience sits on specially arranged chairs, benches and stools. Ceremonies may take several days, and often take place during the weekend, on for example two successive Saturdays. Ceremonies go with ritual sacrifices. The priests bleed the sacral kids and the priestesses offer the blood as a libation to the ancestors' altars (see 3.5.).

The **vodun** religion and its rituals that are closely related to the stories in the corpus were inhibited in 1975. In 1976, I often wondered whether the storytelling would survive, in view of the vigorous efforts of the government to wipe out traditional religion.

The religious pantheons of West Africa were exported together with the slaves to Brazil and Cuba or Haiti in the Caribbean. There the religion evolved into new forms that we also know as **voodoo**. However, in 1976 the pantheons of the Fon people from Benin differed widely from those in Brazil or Haiti. In these countries, the original pantheons mixed up with Christian symbols, as I noticed during my stay in Cap Haitien and Port-au-Prince (Haiti) in 1978 and 1979.

In 1992, twenty years after the coup by Kérékou and 17 years after the prohibition of the **vodun** religion, a new government of Benin reinstalled the indigenous religion. However, the gods that occur in the stories of the corpus were not openly worshipped any more, and their names appeared to be forgotten. A new pantheon was imported from Haiti. In Ouidah, which is nowadays the centre of the traditional **vodun** religion, people worship Papa Dambala, Baron Samedi and Ezili Freda.

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[12] Maupoil emphasized that the French translation of the word **bokɔ́nɔ̀** 'diviner' as 'charlatan' was incorrect. In his eyes, a diviner is a respected priest and traditional doctor. On the other hand, Maupoil was worried about the attitude of the French administration before the Second World War towards divination. He feared that the negative views would cause the extinction of the knowledge of the diviners of both the pharmacopeia and of the ceremonies.

These gods are not the gods from the two main pantheons of the Kingdom of **Danxomè**. Neither of them has a Fon background. On the contrary, Baron Samedi comes from Haiti and the other two originate from Yoruba pantheons. The gods of the corpus appear to have been swept away by the time that passes and the men and woman who forget. However, it is impossible to grasp the meaning of the **hwènùxó** without some elementary knowledge and understanding of the **vodun** religion back in 1976.

1.4.   An overview of publications on Fongbe grammar

With colonization, French became the official language. During this period, the French colonial administration was focused on assimilation, but the rate of illiteracy was still 90 %, even after independence in 1960 (Höftmann 1993: 17ff.). In the seventies of the last century the Gbe languages were spoken by 60 % of the inhabitants; 30 % of them were Fongbe native speakers. This relative high number of Fongbe speakers was a consequence of the developments in the past. As a result of the growth of the territory, Fongbe became the dominant language in the region (Höftmann 1993: 18).

The French colonial policy attempted to deny the indigenous languages and prohibited their use in official communication. Soon after its coup in 1972, the Kérékou administration initiated the policy of studying and teaching local languages (Höftmann 1993: 17). The administration installed the National Language Commission (CNL) that started the promotion of literacy with enthusiasm.

Despite the colonial language policy, Roman Catholic missionaries studied the Fongbe language throughout the 20th century. Father Superior Joulord published the first Fongbe vocabulary as early as 1907 (Joulord 1907). It consisted of 38 pages. After the end of the Second World War, French missionaries started to study Fongbe systematically. They published the majority of their studies in Cotonou. All publications were roneotyped, and probably duplicated in a limited number of copies.

The Fongbe-French dictionary by Segurola was the first methodical Fongbe dictionary that appeared. He began his studies in 1948 to publish the dictionary in 1963 (Segurola 1968). The dictionary consists of 640 pages and mentions the vocabulary of Joulord as its roots.[13]

Dujarier published a series of conversational and phrase books in Ouidah (Dujarier 1967). The books intend to teach Fongbe conversation to French expatriates. They

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[13] This section deals only with Fongbe grammars in general. I will not discuss descriptions of specific parts.

are practical 'how to speak Fongbe'-guides, that consist of drills in daily situations in various contexts. The author adds a number of remarks to each drill: he discusses the differences in tone and meaning, and quotes proverbs. The spelling in this publication is a personal spelling that, for example, uses a tilde to indicate nasal vowels.

Guillet gets the credit for being the author of the first Fongbe grammar. He published a manual on Fongbe grammar and tonality: 'Initiation à la tonalité et à la grammaire de la langue Fon' (Guillet 1973 a). Preparatory studies and research took place at the monastery of the Benedictines at Toffo in July 1972. This manual is the first systematic description of the grammar and the tonal system of Fongbe. The manual consists of 17 lessons, and 21 conversation drills. Guillet advises his students to train the drills with the help of a native Fongbe speaker. The lessons show a deliberately designed method that starts each lesson with about a dozen drawings of objects (nouns) and actions (verbs), and a vocabulary of Fongbe words. The lesson then explains the images in a question-and- answer- drill that offers an extensive variety of clauses, and often covers as much as four pages. The third and last part of the lesson describes and discusses the grammatical and tonal rules of that lesson. The authors rigorously keep on this combination of dialogues and drills throughout the manual. In about the same period the co-authors Guillet and Dujarier completed the Fongbe grammar by publishing a supplementary part: 'Eléments de grammaire Fon' (Guillet and Dujarier 1973). This book combined several papers that they had previously individually published. The manual and the book together provide us with the first systematic description of Fongbe grammar. Guillet sees mostly to the functional categories, and Dujarier deals with the lexical categories. The supplementary grammar refers to the recently published manual; and although the cover of the manual writes 1972, Guillet ended his preface of the manual with the date of July 12, 1973. I therefore think that both works appeared in 1973.

Later that year Guillet published a phrase book that consists of 30 texts, both conversations and stories (Guillet 1973 b). He presented the phrase book as a follow-up to his manual. The language consultants who wrote the texts come from different places, Gbegnonvi came from Ouidah, Koi was from Torri-Bossito and Adanmaho came from Toffo. The phrase book uses the official Fongbe spelling that the National Language Commission introduced in 1973. Therefore the publishing date must be estimated late 1973.[14]

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[14] The publications before 1973 use the spelling that Segurola introduced (Segurola 1968). The National Language Commission introduced the new Fongbe spelling in 1973 (Tokoudagba 1973, Hounyème 1973). This spelling becomes the official spelling in 1975 (Decret du Gouvernement. 75-272 of October 24 1975 CNDL).

Another roneotyped publication named 'Eléments de recherche sur la langue Fon' appeared in 1982. The cover mentions no author. The publication is referred to as Anonymous 1982. The first page shows two handwritten remarks. The paper was published in Cotonou, whereafter somebody added the name of the country: Benin. The letters 's.n.' meaning 'sans nom' or 'anonymous' were handwritten behind the year of publication. Actually, the book is an abbreviated and stripped version of the manual of Fongbe grammar by Guillet, and the supplementary grammar by Guillet and Dujarier (Guillet 1973 a; Guillet and Dujarier 1973). The book neither does mention the original authors, nor is it a complete copy of its predecessors. Actually, the anonymous version of Fongbe grammar omits several descriptions and their examples as well as the argumentation that supports the explanations. Anonymous refers to the DAPR-leaflets **Nukplɔnwéma Fɔngbemɛ tɔn**, meaning 'Learner's book of Fongbe', edited by Tokoudagba of the CNDL, the Dahomean Language Commission (Tokoudagba 1975). Anonymous uses the official spelling of 1975 to publish his copy of the works of Guillet and Dujarier.[15]

Höftmann published a Fongbe grammar in German twenty years after Guillet (Höftmann 1993). The 'Grammatik des Fɔn' describes the urban variant of Fongbe, the language that people speak in Cotonou and its vicinities. This publication also includes the Abomey variant, which is the origin of Fongbe. The grammar has three parts: phonology, morphology and syntax (Höftmann 1993: 19). Höftmann gathered the texts in this grammar in the years 1973 to 1979 with the support of the National Language Commission. She reports the changes in language policy of the revolutionary administration. The grammar refers to the works by Guillet and Dujarier that she apparently consulted. Rassinoux published a dictionary Fon-Français and a dictionary Français-Fon in 2000. Both dictionaries are based on the work of Segurola (Segurola and Rassinoux 2000; Rassinoux 2000). Several years later, Höftmann published a dictionary Fon-Français and a dictionary Français-Fon (Höftmann 2003).

Lefebvre and Brousseau published an integral 'Grammar of Fongbe' that provides us with many details (Lefebvre and Brousseau 2002). The grammar describes the phonology, the functional categories and the interactions between them, as well as the major lexical categories and major syntactic constructions. Lefebvre leans heavily on Anonymous, specifically when it comes to examples and analyses (Anonymous 1982). In consequence, the 'Grammar of Fongbe' misses the arguments proposed by Guillet and Dujarier in 'Eléments de grammaire Fongbe', though Lefebvre remarked the following: "Similar facts are also noted in Guillet and Dujarier (1973) and Agbidinoukoun (1991: 233)" (Lefebvre and Brousseau 2002: 48). This quotation is puzzling indeed, especially when one considers Höftmann's

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[15] The editor Julien Tokoudagba offered me the DAPR-leaflets in 1976. The book appeared in 1975; it has 36 pages.

acknowledgement of the work of Guillet and Dujarier in the grammar that appeared nine years earlier.[16] Actually, the grammar by Guillet and Dujarier gives a much better insight into a number of grammatical issues that I encountered in the corpus than the grammar of Lefebvre and Brousseau does.

Guillet and Dujarier describe a number of features of language use that occur also in the narrative discourse of the corpus (see part 4 Style). The grammars by Höftmann and Lefebvre pay little attention to these features. These grammars were published many years after I collected the corpus. Either speech in the rural areas differs from urban Fongbe, or narrative discourse uses specific functions and rules. A third possibility is that these features disappeared from present-day Fongbe with regard to the grammar by Lefebvre. Conclusively, I consider the grammars by Guillet and Dujarier as an important reference mark.

1.5. Earlier publications about Fongbe and related verbal art

The first part of this section deals with publications on the verbal art of the Fon of Benin. All of these studies are older than the recording of the corpus in 1976, although some of them were published or republished after 1976. The second section gives a brief overview of publications about verbal art in the neighbouring Ewegbe territory in Togo and Ghana.

Publications about Fongbe verbal art

When France finally succeeded in the conquest of the colony that they called French Equatorial Africa, the republic sent, on a regular basis, the so-called colonial functionaries to investigate the peoples and the territory. The French administration aimed at an extensive and systematic description of the ethnographic background of the peoples in their colonies. The colonial administrator Le Hérissé wrote a concise history that covers the reigns of the eleven kings of **Danxomè** 'Histoire du Dahomey racontée par un indigène' (Le Hérissé 1911: 271-352). His publication also contains eleven stories and songs. His colleague Maupoil worked in the area from 1934 to 1936. He described the divination and the diviner's practices and the meaning of **Fa**, 'the spirit of divination' in the thirties of the last century (Maupoil

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[16] The quote refers to a minor detail; one may place the possession marker **sín** after a noun, but one may also omit the marker. This omission often happens in Fongbe: one conveys the origin or the genitive function by a noun phrase that consists of two nominal constituents of which the last one is the genitive of the first one. Lefebvre also referred to Guillet and Dujarier in the introduction (Lefebvre and Brousseau 2002: 9). It is highly probable that the quote refers to the publication by Agbidinoukoun.

1988, and see also 5.5.). Maupoil also provided us with a collection of 73 stories about **Fa** that he qualified as legends (see 5.5.). Both publications contain stories and characters that are similar to the corpus.

The American anthropologist Herskovits came to the former Kingdom of **Danxomè** in 1931 to study the roots of the New World after he accomplished a fieldwork in Surinam in 1928 and 1929 (Herskovits 1938; Herskovits and Herskovits 1970). Herskovits aimed to find the evidence of the legacy of African culture in the Afro-American cultures and intended to compare the New World Culture of North and South America to the Old World Culture, which was in his approach the culture of Africa, Europe and Asia. Herskovits looked for similarities. He took it for granted that the stories travelled from West Africa to Surinam. His main objective was to prove that Surinam people have their roots in the Ashanti kingdom in Ghana, but also in the kingdom of **Danxomè**. He stated that the Fon people came second as influential resource (Herskovits and Herskovits 1970: 4, 8). The Herskovitses' fieldwork brought them to Abomey, Allada and Ouidah. The choice for Ouidah is still questionable, if only because the Brazilian influence from the then recently re-immigrated slaves was still very strong at that time (Verger 1968). Herskovits aimed at making a classification that compared his collection of Surinam stories to his new collection of Dahomean stories. Therefore, he classified the material in a way that would facilitate the comparative and cross-cultural analysis (Herskovits and Herskovits 1970: 26).

Herskovits distinguished two main categories: the 'hwenoho', the myths, and the 'heho', the non-religious tales. He also marked out subclasses for both categories. The 'hwenoho', the myths, comprise stories of the gods. They consist also of clan myth-chronicles that tell the origin of the clans, including explanations of ritual behaviour, food taboos, and the ancestral code. These clan myths use supernatural beings or animals that talk like human beings as a metaphorical device to establish a setting of ancient times (Herskovits and Herskovits 1970: 20). The 'heho', the non-religious tales, have the following seven subclasses: divination stories, hunter stories, 'Enfant Terrible' stories (twins, orphans, children born to die, or abnormally born), the humorous Yo stories, tales of women (love, intrigue and betrayal), explanatory and moralizing tales, transformation tales and other miscellaneous. Herskovits observed that these stories start with for example "This is about Hunter" or "This is about Orphan" (Herskovits and Herskovits 1970: 23). He added that "the opening sets the stage by naming the characters, and the tasks before them; but the end, whether as moral or explanation, describes the tale." (Herskovits and Herskovits 1970: 24).

Unfortunately, the Herskovitses' work has many lapses. Maupoil arrived in the area when Herskovits published the first articles on his fieldwork. Maupoil often expressed his doubts about the observations and statements of Herskovits. Maupoil

mentioned that his doubts even increased when he was unable to get confirmation of the statements, although he put a lot of effort into checking the observations of Herskovits with his own consultants (Maupoil 1988). One of the mitigating factors of the number of lapses is the circumstance that the communication between Herskovits and his consultants and vice versa must have been difficult: they did not speak each other's language. Herskovits himself admitted that he did not speak French, and that he had not even tried to master Fongbe, that he estimated far too difficult to learn. On the other hand, the language consultants spoke Fongbe and some French, but they hardly spoke English. It is obvious that total confusion is unavoidable when partners hardly speak each other's language. The language confusion shows for example in a story that mentions the friendship between a cat and a dog (Herskovits and Herskovits 1970: 225-227). This is odd, for the Fon consider the cat and the duck as true friends who share wisdom and discretion (AC 6). There is little doubt that an indistinct pronunciation led to the misunderstanding of dog instead of duck. Moreover, it is hitherto unthought-of that the wise cat would be friends with the aggressive and talkative dog who is the symbol of **Lĕgbà** (see also 5.5. Religious devices).

During the storytelling, Frances Herskovits typed the renderings of the stories. Actually, the book shows that these renderings are summaries that do not have the typical repetitions or recurrent variations that Fongbe performers favour. Therefore, it is hardly possible to compare these stories with the ones in publications by other authors. However, Herskovits conveys his fascination by giving the following advice at the end of the introduction: "As spoken forms, the stories should preferably be read aloud." (Herskovits and Herskovits 1970: 122).

The publications by the Herskovitses are much cited, especially in English publications. On the other hand, the results of his research are not in line with the publications by French and Beninese authors. His lack of knowledge of Fongbe and of French is certainly one of the reasons for some of his deviant interpretations.

Argyle wrote a survey of the available publications about the Fon of **Danxomè** (Argyle 1966). He vigorously criticized the Herskovitses' publications for their shallowness. In view of the vast number of data and studies about **Danxomè**, Argyle doubted that the statements and arguments by Herskovits were valid. He frequently quotes Herskovits, though he often adds a sceptical comment to these quotes. He underlines the lack of observation of the descriptions, when he mentions for example the statement of Herkovits that the Kings of **Danxomè** never killed a captured king. This statement is contradictory to the descriptions by a number of authors who affirmed that captured kings were killed at the yearly 'Customs' in Abomey. Early European travellers such as Norris, Forbes and Burton reported on the kingdom (Norris 1789; Forbes 1851; Burton 1864). All of them mentioned that the skulls of captured kings were carefully preserved for exhibition on special

occasions. Verger confirmed this as a fact in his publication on slave trade (Verger 1968). Actually, the proof is in the preserving of the skulls of captured kings. The compound of the royal palaces in Abomey is a museum nowadays. It exhibits a 19th century throne that rests on the skulls of captured Yoruba chiefs. The *Musée du Quai Branly* shows a similar throne in Paris, France (Herskovits 1938, vol. 2: 98; Argyle 1966: 85). Argyle is not alone in being critical of the publications of Herskovits. Many years later, Babalola Yai endorses Argyle's views (Babalola Yai 1999).

Besides the publications of ethnographical investigations by the French administrators, indigenous publications appeared as well in Cotonou (Quenum 1938). The Dahomean ethnographic magazine 'Les Etudes Dahoméennes' had its head office in Cotonou and published articles and indigenous stories (Etudes Dahoméennes 1955, 1956, 1967, 1968).

The Beninese author Guédou provides us with a substantial description of the Fongbe concepts **xó**, 'speech', 'discourse' and **gbè**, 'voice', 'language' (Guédou 1985). He did the research in the town of Abomey. His study investigated the 'Fongbe social speech' meaning the oral literature and language. The analysis shows that the social speech elaborately refers to the relation between a person and his speech. Social speech depends on the social event, and even fits into the event. The ownership of **xó** is considered to belong to the society that speaks the language **gbè**. Fongbe verbal art stems from the society as a whole system (Guédou 1985: 406). However, the style of the performance or the ritual effectiveness belongs to the individual storyteller (Guédou 1985: 406ff.). Guédou considers the genre **hwènùxó** the words of the elders. He defines the genre as long educational stories that give advice for life. He considers **hwènùxó** the narrative of an event in the past that includes all narratives about characters, places and moments. Guédou affirms that **hwènùxó** comprises also a number of subgenres that need further examination, although he provides us with a provisional classification of the subgenres (Guédou 1985: 450ff.). He describes the following subgenres amongst others: there is the long **hwènùxó** that is a story about human characters and their misbehaviour and the **yèxó** 'words of **yè**', 'shadow' or 'double' which are stories about beings that do not exist, and that never existed. The main feature of these stories is that they have no human characters (Guédou 1985: 409). A third subgenre is the **xèxó**, 'the words of the birds'; these are fables about animals. The description of the **yèxó** is ambiguous. It is correct that the Fongbe **yè** has the meaning of 'spirit' or 'double' in a religious way of speaking. One of the agents in the corpus is called **Yěyɛ**, meaning 'the double spirit' or 'the Spirit Man', who is the hunter, and who is the counterpart agent of the king (AC 10). Unfortunately, Guédou does not provide us with an explanation of **Yɔgbó**, 'the trickster', who is also called **Yè**. Here is a double indeed. The trickster who is called **Yɔgbó** becomes **Yè** either when he leaves the earth for

the House of Rain in the Land of Blue Sky, or for the Ancestor's Market. I will discuss this later when I describe the properties and surnames of the trickster (see also 5.2.3., and 6.5.).

Unfortunately, the transcriptions of the corpora of Fongbe stories that I discussed in this section are not publicly available. Therefore, it is not easy to compare the language of these publications to the language of my stories. However, I can compare the elements and properties that occur in the stories.

Publications about Ewegbe stories

When discussing the stories of the corpus, I will refer to two publications about storytelling in Togo, a country that has a common border with the West of Benin. Along the coast and inwards Togo and Ghana, people speak **Ewegbe** which like Fongbe is also a Gbe language that belongs to the Kwa family (Williamson and Blench 2000). Both languages and cultural heritages bear a resemblance.

Verdier published a corpus that consists of one thousand 1382 stories in the various languages of Togo (Verdier 1971). His book gives an overview of the specific universe of the stories that is populated by gods, humans and animals. The stories in his corpus are educational according to Verdier. His approach is quite the contrary to the neat description of the Fongbe genres by Guédou. Verdier admitted that he found it hard to classify his corpus that he reluctantly described in terms of European genres. (Verdier 1971 vol.1: 376, 382).

The second publication is by Konrad who collected 400 **Ewegbe** stories in southern Togo and Ghana, performed by men and women (Konrad 1985). The book gives a description and analysis of comic stories about the **Ewegbe** trickster, and contains thirty comic stories. The description also includes the nonverbal aspects of the performance. The storytellers of this corpus were predominantly men. Konrad mentions that women storytellers kept a low profile in the following quote:

> Women are tended to be more reserved and therefore, 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. (Konrad 1994: 3).

The most popular verbal art among the Ewe is the **gli**, the plural being **gliwo**, that is the imaginative oral narrative. The Ewe trickster is **Yiyi**, the small spider who has a round belly, and who speaks very rapidly with a nasal voice. The main topics of the trickster stories are deceit and deception. The primary function of trickster stories is

to entertain, but they still have an educational function. The stories recite how the trickster is punished, and how he exceptionally is rewarded with booty and trophies that he obtained by deceit. Konrad's analysis shows that trickster stories have the following three key aspects: they are comic stories, they are performed narratives, and they convey cultural values and beliefs. Konrad emphasizes that the **gliwo** have no script, and that the stories have no fixed form. Quite the contrary, the structure of each story is unique, and depends on the mood of the performer who chooses the specific performance. The form of the stories strictly depends on the oral character. Konrad calls the stories 'impromptu renderings'. Stories are improvisations around the plots and images that are familiar to the **Ewegbe** audience. The accomplished performers use repetitive patterns between the peak and the denouement. Verbal and non-verbal aspects are an important part of this culture where the literacy rate is relatively low.

1.6. Concepts and approaches

In this section, I will discuss several concepts and approaches that, in my view, are helpful to elucidate the features of the Fongbe performance. First, I will explain why I perceive the performance as a speech act in the sense that the performance is a set of utterances that provokes a social action. Afterwards, I will discuss two concepts that are appropriate to describe the features of the performance. I will start with the ethnopoetics approach and continue with the semiotic approach. These concepts have a similar background, and complement one another. Finally, I will introduce the mental usage of the storyboard.

The performance is one of the main features of Fongbe storytelling. The performer holds the floor, and fascinates the audience by delivering a vivacious flow of images and feelings. Performers literally stage their story and prevent the audience from pondering on a specific part. Actually, the performance is a special form of art that is hard to capture, because it has its own specifications.

In general, the majority of concepts in discourse studies are designed to understand a specific type of literature. These concepts for example describe the plots and protagonists of stories as if they were about people in real life who are recognisable characters. A survey of discourse studies shows that a description of universal functions is not quite satisfactory, for it only accounts for Eurocentric and Western features. The authors often neglect the occurrence of specific or cultural features that have locally driven patterns. This calls to mind the idea of linguistic relativity, also known as the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis', which considers that the fundamental categories of thought, such as time and space, differ from language to language. The hypothesis concerns the influence of the cultural context or the worldview that leads

to a specific way of speaking. "Language is the most massive and inclusive art we know." (Sapir 1921: 220).

Gumperz and Levinson re-examined linguistic relativity, "the idea that culture, *through* language affects the way we think, especially perhaps our classification of the experienced world." (Gumperz and Levinson 1996, I: 8; italics in the original). The authors of this interdisciplinary book explore the evidence that different languages code the world with distinct semantic concepts. They show that these concepts influence cognitive processes, and require a wider definition of meaning that incorporates contextual influences on interpretation.[17]

One of the most remarkable features of the performance of Fongbe storytelling is the prosody that alternates utterances with silence. Austin's concept of 'speech act' seems the appropriate approach to analyse the utterances of the performance: "What we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation." (Austin 1962: 138). Austin makes a distinction between two types of speech acts: the illocutionary and the perlocutionary acts. He defined statements and promises as illocutionary acts. Perlocutionary acts involve achieving specific effects on hearers such as convincing and amusing. The Fongbe performance is a perlocutionary speech act that requests the audience to act. Austin also defined the speech act as a number of utterances that do not necessarily coincide with clauses. Both notions are crucial to understand the performance of the corpus.

Two more concepts are underlying the analysis of the performance of the corpus. In the sixties of the last century, two distinct groups of academics took interest in narrative discourse. Both concepts are close, for they take root in the publications of the pre-war Prague School, especially in the publications about functions in stylistics and poetics by Jakobson and Mukǎrovsky (Jakobson 1960; Mukǎrovsky 1970). Features of description are the specific social situation of speech, and the language usage and the underlying codes in terms of the context of the culture of a society.

In the United States of America, a group of anthropological linguists aspire to analyse the 'mode of speaking' and the 'way of living' and to describe a framework of the ethnography of speaking. I will particularly consider the work of Bauman whose ethnopoetic approach is performance-centred. In France, several scholars of different disciplines aimed at analysing the cultural codes of a message and therewith at designing a semiotic framework. They have become known as the French Structuralists. I will particularly pay attention to the ideas of the semioticians Barthes and Greimas.

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[17] The issue is not to rethink linguistic determinism, but to reconsider perception and meaning, such as, for example, the description of cultural variations in thought processes by Cole and Scribner (Cole and Scribner 1974).

Ethnopoetics: a performance-centred approach

The American anthropological linguists were influenced by the linguistic functionalism of the pre-war Prague School and the linguist Jakobson, as well as by the works of the anthropologist Boas and the linguist Sapir. They aimed at formulating a descriptive framework of 'the ethnography of speaking'. The ethnography of speaking should describe the patterns of language use as a cultural system in a particular society (Bauman and Sherzer 1974: 7). The exploration involved the linking of the verbal aspects to the sociocultural aspects in the conduct of speaking. The framework of 'the ethnography of speaking' is also known as 'the ethnography of communication'. The term was called into being by Hymes (Gumperz and Hymes 1972). Hymes considered that rules of speaking are "the ways in which speakers associate particular modes of speaking, topics or message forms, with particular settings and activities" (Gumperz and Hymes 1972: 36). In his view, both the speech event and the speech act are the basic unit for the verbal interaction in speech communities.

Bauman noted that the term performance conveys the dual sense of artistic 'action' and artistic 'event' (Bauman 1974: 290). His approach of verbal art is clearly performance-centred: "Performance is a mode of language use, a way of speaking" (Bauman 1978: 11). He aimed at explaining the patterning of culture, which is the orientation of individuals to participate in several and overlapping speech communities (Bauman and Sherzer 1974: 16). In his view, the performance of individual performers is a 'mode of speaking', and a 'way of living'.

Bauman's descriptions of performance as socially appropriate are very close to the way I would describe the lively sessions that I attended during the recording of the corpus. Henceforth his argument that the terms oral tradition or oral literature are hardly justified is powerful. Actually, these terms only take into account the society ownership of the stories, and neglect the creativity of the individual artist. Bauman's approach emphasized that "the patterning of language goes far beyond laws of grammar to comprehend the use of language in social life" (Bauman and Sherzer 1974: 6). He introduced the notion of 'framing' to describe the 'interpretative frame', which cues an audience about what to expect from a verbal performance, which is to follow (Bauman 1974: 292). He also made clear that the description of performance should pay attention to the usage of communicative means such as formulae, codes and parallelism (Bauman 1978: 16).

"The essential task in the ethnography of performance is to determine the *culture-specific constellations of communicative means that serve to key performance in particular communities*" (Bauman 1978: 22; italics in the original). Bauman affirms Jakobson's view, that narratives are keyed both to the events in which they are told and to the events that they recount (Bauman 1986: 2; Jakobson 1971). Bauman

considers the way in which performance is keyed as a signal for a particular act of expression. He notes that communicative means are embodied in particular genres of a culture that show conventionalized utterance types that incorporate the features of the performance (Bauman 1978: 25).

The semiotic approach: cultural codes and functions

The approach of the French Structuralists emanates from the studies of the Russian Formalists, from the ideas that Saussure developed in the field of linguistics (Saussure 1972), the theories of the pre-war Prague School, including Jakobson, as well as the anthropological studies of Lévi-Strauss.[18]

The Structuralists published their articles and studies in specialized magazines, which appeared later in a single volume per author. Each author used his own concepts and nomenclature. The most important publication was the magazine 'Communications' that was published by the prestigious 'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes' (EPHE), part of Sorbonne University in Paris. One of the leading figures was Roland Barthes who was research fellow at the 'Centre d'Etudes des Communications de Masse' at EPHE. His predecessors at EPHE were amongst others Benveniste, Saussure and Lévi-Strauss. Under the leadership of Jakobson, they founded together with Greimas the 'Cercle parisien de sémiotique', the Parisian Semiotics Society, in 1967 (Floch 1990: 7). This research centre for mass communication considered culture as a set of myths, a specific language or jargon (Barthes 1970: 10).

Barthes described the individual patterns in writing and the underlying cultural codes (Barthes 1966). He aimed at getting insight in a universal system of signification that is part of the binary distinction of 'Langue – Parole' by Saussure (Barthes 1964: 98-102). Barthes' approach also stems from the ideas of Hjelmslev who distinguished the 'denotation' or 'basic meaning' from the 'connotation' or 'contextual meaning' (Hjelmslev 1969). This point of view comes close to the core idea of linguistic relativity that culture, through language, affects the way we think (see p. 32).

Barthes demystified the myths of French daily life in a number of essays in which he analysed the cultural illusions on which the French feed, for example in the field of fashion, food, the automotive industry and movable property. He describes the cultural framework and its terms of reference. In his view, the cultural system of

[18] Lévi-Strauss coined the word 'structuralism'. The French Structuralists often use the term 'recherches sémiologiques' when they refer to a semiotic framework. The term semiology originates from Saussure who did not elaborate the concept. Culler gave a survey of Structuralists poetics (1986).

meaning consists of the codes that people take for granted. However, codes are far from being natural; on the contrary, they are produced from the socially conventional and moral fabric (Barthes 1970: 9). Barthes shows in his analyses, that history and culture bring these codes about. The underlying codes play a key role in the meaning of language (Barthes 1964: 18).

Barthes blamed his fellow literary analysts for being Utopian. In his view, they favoured the inductive method as a start-up to describe a genre, era or society, but at the same time, they distorted the outcome by anticipating the framework of a universal model. He subtly argued, that the linguistic colleagues preferred the deductive method, although they had to account for 3000 languages. In his own words:

"Que dire alors de l'analyse narrative, placée devant des millions de récits? Elle est par force condamnée à une procédure déductive;"(Barthes 1966: 2).

One of the articles by Barthes constitutes a particular meaningful approach to the analysis of the corpus (Barthes 1966). The article discusses the necessity to design a structural analysis of narrative discourse, and opens with the following sentence: "Innombrables sont les récits du monde", meaning 'the number of narrative texts around is huge' (Barthes 1966: 1). Barthes explains that this sentence reflects his perception of the variety of genres, that is the narrative discourse whether oral or written, the narrative pictures that are fixed photos or mobile movies, and the narrative gestures, but also the mix of all these substances.

The Structuralists aimed at the design of a semiotic framework that systematically described the "lisibilité", meaning the 'understandability' of a message (Greimas 1966 (a): 28). Structuralism emphasizes the role of the reader instead of the one of the author. The basic idea of the concept of understanding is that the message conveys a code that the receiver of the message recognizes and interprets. The semiotic framework of narrative discourse must distinguish three levels of description: the level of 'functions', the level of 'actions', and the level of the 'plot' or intrigue self. The level of 'functions' indicates the sequences of actions and events (Propp 1958; Bremond 1968). Bremond adopted Propp's concept of function as the basic unit of a narrative, though he rejected Propp's idea of the obligatory order of the successive functions. Greimas elaborated the level of 'actions'. He considered characters as the 'actants' who are the operators of the message that is encoded in a binary opposition of actions and counteractions (Greimas 1966 (b): 172ff.; see also 5.3.). The level of the 'plot' distinguishes the 'real' history of a story from the plot that the writer uses to tell the story (see chapter 17). The distinction originates from

the Russian Formalists, but the theoretical elaboration dates from the sixties, and involves both Eco and Todorov (Eco 1966; Todorov 1966).[19]

The storyboard metaphor

In view of the emphasis that the majority of European-based analyses and models put on the reading of written texts to understand their meaning, it is remarkable that the Structuralists followed their ambition to initiate applied research. In the sixties of the last century, Greimas took the initiative to found the 'Groupe de Recherches Sémio-Linguistiques', whereupon the INSEAD (Institut Européen d'Administration des Affaires) Business School in Fontainebleau realized the importance of the contribution of this research for their teaching programme. INSEAD (www.insead.edu) used the results to teach its students the strategic basics of marketing. From then on, the studies of Barthes, Greimas and Eco were widely brought into use in the field of consumer advertising, marketing communication and mass communication in Europe. These studies influenced the advertising industry that, from then on, considered a commercial as a story.

I think that it is wise to step over the limits of discourse studies to broaden one's horizon to the field of pictorial art and movie pictures. This is why I will refer to the storyboard technique to explain how the performers of the corpus create the configuration of the performance. A storyboard is like the first version of a film script. It consists of a set of panels that depict the successive stages of the story. Of course, in storytelling the technique of the storyboard is a mental process and not a physical exercise with real panels with instructions and pictures. Nevertheless, the storyboard technique is the key to the Fongbe performance and its communicative configuration.[20]

I will use an ethnopoetic approach as well as a semiotic approach to describe and to analyse the performance and the discourse of the stories in the corpus. It is obvious that both approaches are necessary to understand the performance, the content and the way that the performers stage the plot. Both provide us with tools that are helpful to describe verbal art. The semiotician Barthes pleads to use deduction to describe the codes and terms of reference in stories. Bauman's approach focuses on the

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[19] American academics often call the French structuralism 'Post-structuralism', probably taking seriously the critical hints about the flirtation of several French academics with unconventional philosophies as nihilism or neo-Marxism in the sixties and the seventies of the last century.

[20] The storyboard technique comes from the early days of the film industry. It is used to create a story when there are still great degrees of freedom to develop the plot. It is nowadays widely used in the media industry.

description of frames and specific patterns in a speech community. The publications of both have in common that they aim at a systematic unravelling of the underlying codes and frames. There are also differences, though they are subtle. Structuralism studies the functions, actions and the plot of the story. On the other hand, the orientation on understanding allows me to describe the codes that both performer and audience understand. Ethnopoetics studies the mode of speaking, but is also performance-oriented which means that it focuses on the study of the event itself. Both approaches emphasize the communication of the message and the meaning of the message.