

' SHORT TIME TO STAY '
Comments on Time, Literature
and Oral Performance

by

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HANS WOLFF
1920-1967

Hans Wolff was born on April 6, 1920 in Mainz, Germany. In 1934 his family went to Spain where he remained until 1937 when he immigrated to the United States. He attended Queens College, New York, from 1939-1941 and then transferred to Indiana University. From 1942-1946 he served with the Military Intelligence Corps. After the war he returned to Indiana and in 1946 obtained the B.A. magna cum laude in Linguistics and in 1949 a double doctorate in Anthropology and Linguistics (one of the first to be given by that department). In 1949 he was appointed to the faculty of the University of Puerto Rico where he taught for eleven years. His early work was in Amerindian languages, especially in Siouan studies, and in the teaching of English as a second language. While still at the University of Puerto Rico, he was invited in 1953 to visit Nigeria as a UNESCO expert on orthographies. He spent a year in Nigeria, and from that time his interest in Africa and African languages grew. He published widely on the languages and language problems of Nigeria and at the time of his death was one of the leading authorities on Yoruba. In 1960 he accepted an appointment at Michigan State University in the African Studies Center where he taught for three years. While at Michigan State he helped to found and to edit the Journal of African Languages. He also assisted in the early development of the West African Language Conference and for several years served as Chairman of the African Linguistics Committee of the African Studies Association. At the time of his death in September 1967, he was Professor of Linguistics at Northwestern University.

To Daffodils

Fair daffodils, we weep to see
 You haste away so soon;
As yet the early-rising sun
 Has not attain'd his noon.
 Stay, stay
 Until the hasting day
 Has run
 But to the evensong;
And, having pray'd together, we
 Will go with you along.

We have short time to stay, as you,
 We have as short a spring;
As quick a growth to meet decay,
 As you, or anything.
 We die
 As your hours do, and dry
 Away
 Like to the summer's rain;
Or as the pearls of morning's dew,
 Ne'er to be found again.

a poem by

ROBERT HERRICK
1591-1674

SHORT TIME TO STAY
Comments on Time, Literature and Oral Performance

Let me say at the outset how honored I am to contribute to this series of Hans Wolff Memorial Lectures. Although, unlike some of my distinguished predecessors, I did not have the good fortune to meet Hans Wolff personally, I have found his writings a source of intellectual inspiration, above all in his blend of an interdisciplinary and wide-ranging, yet at the same time down-to-earth, approach to his material. His dual qualification in both linguistics and anthropology are of special relevance, well exemplified in his work relating to the general topics to which I want to address myself tonight: his interest not just in texts or technical linguistic description, but also in the social and temporal setting for people's linguistic and literary activities.

I hope I am thus following the general spirit of Hans Wolff's work in taking a twofold path in my lecture tonight, relating my subject both to wider anthropological studies (especially those concerning time) and to the study of oral literature. Although I cannot follow Hans Wolff in his mastery of Yoruba, many of the examples in my discussion will not be too far away, for I will be drawing on West African material to exemplify my general points (including my own fieldwork in Sierra Leone) as well as setting the discussion in the general context of African oral literature.

The term 'oral literature' has become a common one for the study of unwritten forms in African and other cultures which can be seen as, at the least, analogous to the written forms recognized as 'literature' in the traditional categories of Western civilization (e.g. - to give just a very few instances - the Chadwicks' classic work (1939-40), Jacobs, 1959, the series of volumes in 'The Oxford Library of African Literature' (Clarendon Press, 1964-), Tedlock in Paredes and Bauman 1972, Bauman 1977, Sherzer 1977, Finnegan 1970, 1977, and the influential journal Research in African Literatures 1970-). Despite some continuing arguments about the best term to use in particular pieces of research (some scholars, as you know, prefer 'folklore', 'folk literature') and some etymological blockages felt by purists, the idea of regarding

such forms as in some sense 'literature' is well enough established for it not to need an apologia here -- at any rate, I am not intending to give one. I will merely assert as a given background to my analysis that there is now a recognized area of study in which African oral literature is treated as one form of literature, in principle comparable to written literature in its general form, its literary quality, its various genres and, to some extent at least, in the kind of analysis to which it can be subjected.

The stress in such study is most often on the literature in 'oral literature'. There has been a huge research endeavor extending over many years (for this is by no means just a recent phenomenon) devoted to the collection and analysis of texts as the abiding form in which this literature is expressed and through which it can receive wider circulation. This stress on the literature side of the equation is indeed a valid and illuminating one and one which I myself would continue to advocate as one way of extending our cultural horizons and deepening our understanding of the riches of human artistry and imagination. However tonight I want to focus attention on the other side, and consider some of the implications of the oral nature of 'oral literature'. This has, of course, many aspects which I cannot follow up here. The point about it that I want to highlight tonight is the characteristic of oral literature that, being oral, its existence depends on its actual oral performance, i.e., on a specific occasion or occasions rather than on a permanent written text; and that the occasion of the performance is necessarily an event in time. As such it takes up time and it needs the co-ordination of activities of a number of people within time; as Howard Becker put it in a seminal discussion, 'the artist...works in the center of a large network of co-operating people all of whose work is essential to the final outcome' (Becker 1974, p. 769).

This need for co-ordination sounds a simple point, scarcely worth the stating. But a serious consideration of this point also represents something of a contrast to the way literature (even oral literature) is often looked at and presented. When we think of 'literature' we commonly, I think, picture this in terms, basically, of a 'text' -- something which exists in space rather than in time. Indeed

in some ways the picture is often of something timeless, with some kind of permanent existence in its own right above and apart from the immediate pressure of the moment, something which can enshrine an abiding truth which may transcend the detailed occasions of everyday and convey its message and its beauty among differing groups and backgrounds and historical eras.

This set of associations is a powerful one even in the study of oral literature. Of course serious students accept that with oral literature one ought to include some attention to the occasion, the audience, the skills and circumstances of performance and so on, as well as just to the text. But even so the picture of 'literature' still predominates (and not just among structuralists) as something permanent and timeless which can be abstracted for study as a 'text' - something abiding which one does not expect to 'haste away so soon'

Is this misleading with oral literature? Recent work by some leading American anthropologists and folklorists (such as Dell Hymes, Robert Georges, Dan Ben-Amos, Roger Abrahams, Richard Bauman and Dennis Tedlock) has highlighted the way in which the performance of oral literature can be seen as an event in time as well as - indeed rather than - existing in a spatial dimension as a text. They speak of the performance as a 'story-telling event' or a 'communicative event'. I want to adopt a similar outlook here, also linking this with more general anthropological questions about the organization of time and the timed co-ordination of people's activities.

For the background to this approach to African oral literature as an event in time I am also drawing on anthropological and sociological studies of time and time-reckoning. This is a rich field of study, especially in social anthropology where a general contrast is often made between the primarily clock-bound and mechanical system characteristic of Western industrial and urban culture and the possibly more open time order of non-industrial and oral cultures. Basic

to the approach is the idea of the cultural relativity of time. 'Time' is not after all something objective and external, as might be assumed from the viewpoint of recent Western experience, but can be differently ordered and conceived in different cultures - an idea formulated by Durkheim in the conclusion of his influential Elementary forms of the religious life (first published in 1919; see especially pp. 488ff. and 22-3 in 1961 edition) and developed in many detailed studies since. Martin Nilsson's classic Primitive time reckoning, published in 1920, used what was then known as the 'comparative method' to trace the general development from 'chaos' to 'order' in time-reckoning systems: from the discontinuous 'time indications' of the more primitive people to the rational and systematic 'time reckoning' of Western civilization. His framework was somewhat evaluative and evolutionist, it is true, but still drew attention in a detailed and well-documented way to the existence of different systems of time-reckoning in illustration of the cultural differences in time divisions and usages. There have been many anthropological studies since, mostly based on detailed field research (e.g., among others, Hallowell 1937 on Ojibwa, Evans-Pritchard 1939 on Nuer, Bohannan 1953 on Tiv, Beidelman 1963 on Kaguru, Pocock 1964 on Patidar, Geertz 1966 on Bali, Panoff 1969 on Maenge, Ohnuki-Tierney 1973 on Ainu, Bourdieu 1977 on Kabyle peasants), as well as comparative comment from an anthropological viewpoint (e.g. Goody 1968, 1977 pp. 45 ff, Douglas 1973 Part 3, Lévi-Strauss 1962 ch. 8, Barnes 1971, Jackson 1968, Bloch 1977, or, of a more generalized kind, Hallpike 1979 and Zaslavsky 1973) and studies which relate to the characteristics of time-reckoning in western cultures (e.g., Moore 1963, Cipolla 1967, Halbwachs 1947, Gurvitch 1958) or differences within them, as in E.T. Hall's light-hearted but perceptive account of the differences between North American and Latin American or between North European and Arab time systems (Hall, 1955, 1959, etc.).

The general theme which runs through such studies is the social and cultural dimension: time is not something abstract and culture-independent, but created through social interactions and in coordination with human activities. Just as for the Nuer it is not time to break camp and return to the villages because it is month of dwat (one of the 12 months into which they can divide their year) but "one is so

returning and it must, therefore, be dwat" (Evans-Pritchard 1939 p. 201). So the organization of time turns on culturally-chosen rules and actions and on the coordination of human activities rather than on scientifically-set measurement. It is the activity, not the mathematical time segment, that is prior. (I am not intending to enter into questions of the philosophy of time but I suppose this kind of analysis would fit broadly with what Newton-Smith calls the 'reductionist view of time' (1980 pp. 6ff). Edmund Leach sums up this general outlook when he writes in his essay 'Time and false noses', that

We talk of measuring time, as if time were a concrete thing waiting to be measured; but in fact, we create time by creating intervals in social life. Until we have done this there is no time to be measured (1966, p. 135).

This comment forms a useful background to the questions I want to raise in relation to oral literature, about how time is organized and created and how activities are co-ordinated in time, especially in societies in which the clock is not a dominant feature of time-reckoning.

I want to make one further point about anthropological studies of the relativity of time ordering before turning more directly to the subject of oral literature. Though many of the original authors themselves were often far from intending this, some of their studies have been taken up as demonstrating a radical divide in attitudes to time between non-industrial (or oral) and industrial (or literate) cultures, a supposed divide which is further sharpened by the still-influential romantic view of 'the primitive'. Thus a truth about cultural relativity has gained credence in the exaggerated form in which two differing cultural types are broadly opposed to each other. In this binary model, vagueness about time divisions in the one type of culture sharply contrasts with the exact and rational time-keeping of the other; little or no division of labor in the former, and hence no need to co-ordinate activities since people are broadly undifferentiated and carry out the same activities as each other, is opposed to the necessity in highly differentiated industrial

and urban contexts to co-ordinate by the clock. Along the same lines, non-industrial societies viewed as essentially rural and close to nature, dominated by the natural rhythms of the year, the seasons, the stars, and the agricultural cycle, and possessing little scope for active and ordered time choices beyond these natural cycles; and this is seen as radically different from the artificial, urban and planned nature of our 'mechanical civilization'. Similarly, when 'development' is discussed, it is often held that "undeveloped" peoples must first be taught the idea of 'saving time', or 'counting time.' The assumption is that in such cultures people merely complete whatever task is in hand and then fall back into a passive acceptance of time just drifting past -- going to sleep for instance rather than 'making the most of time' by choosing to use it for specific activities in a fashion thought more typical of 'developed' nations.

Of course, there is a modicum of fact behind such stereotypes. And there is also perhaps some truth in the claim that the English language unlike some others inevitably draws attention to time whether we want it to or not through its insistence that 'every verb form show a tense', so that, as Quine puts it, 'our ordinary language shows a tiresome bias in its treatment of time' (Quine 1960, p. 170). But the final impression that is sometimes evoked in statements about non-industrial societies is a somewhat romantic and exaggerated one of people following a collectively-imposed system (often based on natural rhythms) rather than making specific choices; fitting in with broad annual cycles but not co-ordinating specific timed commitments beyond the necessary obligations of the agricultural or ecological seasons or, perhaps, the communally celebrated ritual year; following out a passive rather than planned ordering of time. Though certainly not held by all the writers I have cited, this is a common enough implication of much of their work to have become part of 'conventional wisdom', the kind of view which is epitomized (if in extreme form) in Pierre Bourdieu's comments on Kabyle peasants' 'attitude toward time':

Submission to nature is inseparable from submission to the passage of time in the rhythms of nature. The profound feelings of dependence and solidarity toward that

nature whose vagaries and rigours he suffers, together with the rhythms and constraints to which he feels the more subject since his techniques are particularly precarious, foster in the Kabyle peasant an attitude of submission and of non-chalant indifference to the passage of time which no one dreams of mastering, using up, or saving... free from the concern for schedules, and ignoring the tyranny of the clock... 'the devil's mill', the peasant works without haste, leaving to tomorrow that which cannot be done today.

(1977, pp. 57,58).

I shall be returning to comment on this view again later.

Against this background I now want to turn to some examples of oral literature in Africa. How are oral performances organized in time? Does this involve planning? How are people's activities coordinated and scheduled in time? Behind such questions we have constantly to remember the oral nature of this literature. Like Herrick's daffodils, oral forms, unlike written texts, have a 'short time to stay'--indeed no time to stay without a socially organized and recognized event in time; for they depend on this actual time event--the performance--for their existence.

Co-ordinating people's activities so that they come together at the same time and broadly for the same purpose is a basic requirement that relates both to the ordering of time in any society and, in particular, to the organization of oral literary performance. For though there are occasional instances of solitary songs, the typical context for the realization of oral literary forms is that people must be present together at one time and place--performer(s), participants, audience. Unlike written literature which can

in a sense 'exist' without anyone gathered together, oral literature depends essentially on coordination of people's activities.

Let me give some examples of the kind of organization that may be involved. One evening in September during my fieldwork among the Limba of northern Sierra Leone in 1961, I observed a crowd of people coming out together in one of the compounds outside the chief's hut in the village where I was then staying. They danced, sang and drummed for several hours, producing songs of the kind that could be recorded and published in textual form as examples of Limba 'oral poetry'.

How was this apparently unpremeditated event set up in time? In practice it formed part of a whole series of events, involving careful preparation over several months, leading up to the boys' initiation ceremonies in the following dry season (the main ceremony taking place around April). This was in one sense set in the framework of a yearly cycle, but it also involved specific decisions and planning, for this initiation did not take place every year and its actual enactment depended on several factors and coordinated activities by a large number of people. The boys themselves had to have been working hard all year (and the previous season too) to ensure a plentiful harvest for the rice needed for the ceremonies, for otherwise these could not take place. Each also had to formally petition his father according to the due forms to allow him to enter the ceremony, and in turn each father had to visit the chief to make a formal request for his son, guaranteeing that there would indeed be enough rice for the occasion and accompanying his visit with the expected gifts and appropriate formal oratory. Note the time element already involved --time had to be found (and coordinated with others) for the visits, for organizing the gifts, for arranging through many months' labor that the due harvest would be forthcoming. This initial sequence of events was followed up by the boys themselves undertaking certain formal visits as a group -- once again coordinating their activities and preparations for this, and arranging the time in advance to ensure they were all free at the same time. One of their visits was to the local chief, bringing gifts of palm wine and huge loads of heavy firewood (procuring both of which again takes time) as well as making

formal speeches. It was on that occasion that the evening of special dancing and singing that I witnessed took place. This was a fairly expected phase in the sequence of events leading up to the later initiation, but it did not invariably take place in any given village and in itself depended on a series of further actions by a number of people. The group of boys not only had to bring the due gifts and speeches but also, if they wanted to dance, had to clear that intention with the local chiefs, with the elders and with the recently initiated youths. In each case this involved a lengthy interchange on the lines of 'we want to dance...', with formal speaking by both sides. The women too had to be formally requested and agree beforehand to act as the chorus, essential for responding to the lead singer. So too with the lead singers and the expert drummers. In the case I saw, these all happened to be local, but on similar occasions when a suitable expert is not available or free to perform locally, such experts are sought from other villages and have to make their way through the bush paths to be ready at the due time. In either case, their participation has to be ensured beforehand with due interchange of gifts and words, followed afterwards by gifts (sometimes in the form of money) and appropriately worded thanks. One of the local experts who performed that evening told me that he had in fact spent time earlier in the year making himself a new drum in anticipation, for at this season an expert with a wide reputation could make a reasonable amount of money in Limba terms, by travelling around in answer to invitations to such dances.

This single event then which in textual terms could be abstracted into just a few pages of poetry, in practice involved the coordination of a large number of people - not just on the part of the 80 or so direct participants in the performance, but also the activities of all those whose authority was sought or whose activities, often over the months, were necessary for providing rice, palm wine, or the standard token gift of kola nuts. Detailed organizing and planning involving quite complex coordination of a whole series of activities and decisions lay behind what on the surface might have looked like a simple and even spontaneous event taking place in some kind of 'natural' way among a crowd of undifferentiated people. Yet the performance would not have been realized -- the particular form of that genre of sung poetry

would not have come into existence in its particular formulation or been collectable as text at all -- without that specific event in time having been organized by all those people following up a whole series of organized events in time.

The same general pattern applies to the performance of other Limba songs (here again I am drawing on fieldwork in the 1960's and the ethnographic present tense should be understood in that context). In each case, the full realization of the sung poems depends on performance at a specific time and place and behind this is a series of organized activities, sometimes on a greater sometimes on a lesser scale, depending on the genre and the expected social context. The singing and drumming that takes place throughout the whole night preceding the final initiation ceremony in the dry season involves even larger scale coordination and numbers. Hundreds of people come together, many of them travelling miles through the bush with their gifts, and lengthy preparations have to have been made by their local hosts for their entertainment. On a smaller scale are such events as the performance of the special hunting poetry in the ceremony known as madonsia which follows a hunter's killing of a bush cow. A date is fixed for several days later, and after the due preparations have been completed the hunter comes out in the village at night with his followers (who, again, have to organize their time and commitments to be present to support their colleague), watched by spectators and participants from the village who have arranged their time to be ready to take part in the event. The same pattern is detectable even in Limba work songs. This is a form which, on the face of it, might seem essentially 'spontaneous' and unplanned; indeed, it has been taken by some analysts to represent the 'natural' even biological roots from which rhythm and thus poetry perhaps ultimately sprang (see e.g. Jousse 1925, and discussion in Finnegan 1977, pp. 91 ff). But in this case too, there is sometimes an element of prior organization. When the rice has to be hoed into the hillside, working parties are formed beforehand with plans for a particular day -- and part of the planning is to engage the services of an expert lead singer and drummer who will take his position at the front of the row as the hoers progress up up the steep hillside and answer in chorus to the verses set

by the leader. The leader is not usually paid, but he expects a carefully worded invitation in advance, and thanks and perhaps a token gift later. Even so 'simple' a piece of oral literature as a 'work-song' does not just spring up of itself, it has to be organized and made to happen at a specific time by a number of people co-operating together. Different though the contexts and genres may be in detail, all performances of sung poetry among the Limba depend on this general pattern of co-ordinated activities leading up to and making possible the actual realization of the literary event on a specific occasion -- activities to do with organizing the necessary musical instruments and instrumentalists, the preparation of the food and gifts for performers and audience, the presence and participation of both leader(s) and chorus, the interchange of formal speeches and permissions, and the coming together (sometimes after miles of travelling) of a number of people at the same time.

Every example of oral literature is dependent for its performance in time -- i.e., its actualization as a piece of oral literature at all -- on a similar background of coordination and planning. Or, at any rate, this is one way in which such literary events -- whether or not they are 'collected' and abstracted on a page as a 'text' -- can be looked at by the analyst. They can be seen as involving the necessary coordination of a number of people who are acting with full deliberation and knowledge in their appropriate roles (i.e. not in an undifferentiated non-thinking mass) with the definite and effective intention of bringing about a specific time event which makes possible both the performance of literature and, through this, the creation of specific time divisions in the same sense as that formulated by Edmund Leach (quoted earlier in the larger context of festivals).

One could add many other examples to the sketchy account I have given of the performing of Limba oral poetry - in fact I suspect that every collector of oral literary forms who has taken any interest in the background to their performance could expand on similar patterns of co-operation. In his account of Iwi Egungun chants among the Yoruba, for instance, O'lajubu (1974) explains how one form in which these are performed is at the yearly festival of the Egungun society -- a large occasion which demands long advance organization,

involving not only the singers (who themselves have in turn undertaken special training and, for some of the chants, exact memorizing) but also the instruments, special costumes, food for the participants, etc. etc. Consistent with the urban setting of Yoruba culture the number of spectators is likely to be numbered in hundreds or thousands, and arrangements are made for the chanting to extend for hours, sometimes the whole night through. Again, the Ozidi saga from the Ijaw people recently published as a lengthy text of several hundred pages (Clark 1977) depended on an event in time which was not undertaken every year, but when it did apparently demanded a series of activities -- procession, sacrifice, a succession of dances, and spectators gathering at the due time (Clark 1977, pp. xxxii ff.). Here too, as Becker (1974) put it, art involves 'collective action'.

An even more elaborate organization lay behind the Bagre myths of the Lodagaa people of Ghana published by Jack Goody (1972). These can be regarded primarily as texts (and they are substantial ones of over 5,000 'lines' each). Take for instance the first 22 lines of the 'White Bagre' myth:

Gods,
ancestors,
guardians,
beings of the wild,
the leather bottles
say we should perform,
because of the scorpion's sting,
because of suicide,
aches in the belly,
pains in the head.
The elder brother
slept badly.
He took out some guinea corn
and hurried along
to the diviner
who poured out his bag
and then said,
let's grasp the stick.
They did so
and he picked up 'deity'
and he picked up 'the wild'

and he picked up 'sacrifice'...

ngmini/kpime/siuwe/k>nt>me/game/ka b>>r/ dun>non/
kure pīime/ >>r puur/ >>r zuri/ ka t> kpēē/
gana fāān/ ir a kyī/ ir z> kyena/ gobasoba/
k'o zur l>b/ti eyl ka/ k'o ir ba ny>> /ti ba ny>>/
k'o ir weni/ k'o ir wi> / k'o ir b>>r.

(Goody 1972, pp. 121, 316).

One can also look at this, not as a text, but as a performance organized in time -- part of a sequence of activities which (far from being just a spontaneous bubbling up of some deep "mythic consciousness") in fact necessarily involved hard-headed choices and coordination over a period of 6 months or more.

The recitation of the myth is associated with the initiation ceremonies of the Bagre association in the dry season (around December), but also takes place at earlier stages in the ceremonial sequence and depends on a series of activities to make the whole process possible. Since the Bagre initiation only takes place about every four years - and then only if preliminary inquiries reveal that there will be enough grain, fowls, and potential initiates, and that outstanding debts from the previous round have been settled - a decision has to be made beforehand about its feasibility after coordinated discussion among the lineage, both in the locality where the ceremony is planned and in contact with others. The decision must in fact be taken months in advance for the initiates must be told in time to abstain from shea fruit (ripe in May) during the months leading up to the ceremony. In the interval, much time-consuming work has to be completed in preparation: supplies must be organized for the festivities, beer brewed, firewood obtained 'well in advance', preferably in the previous dry season (Goody 1972, pp. 66-7), and shea butter prepared: 'a long and complicated process that takes many days' (p. 70). Arrangements must be made too for the 'Bagre Speakers' to be present. These are experts who have learned the recitations (again, a time-consuming task). Their role is to repeat the Bagre myth at the appropriate point in the ceremony and to teach it to the initiates - a process involving instruction, practice and testing. The myth itself has to be recited at several points, in each case with the requirement that it has to be repeated three times (again,

no light task). Indeed the Lodagaa sometimes get around this by arranging for two people to recite at once as a 'way of saving time' (pp. 58,69). In the most public part of the final ceremony which forms a necessary background to the performance of the myth (even though the actual recitation is not public) people come from settlements all around, traveling as far as 20 miles to be present (p. 105). Once again, the event has to be organized, co-ordinating the movements of a number of people coming together at a set time.

This series of activities over many months is not carried out just for the sake of the recitation of a particular piece of oral literature, but as part of a whole complex of ceremonies of which the recitation of the Bagre myth forms one part. Nevertheless it is striking that the actual realization of what could, from one viewpoint, be abstracted as a piece of text on the printed page, or, in another prevalent (if misleading) model, as a spontaneous and natural expression of mythopoeic imagination, in practice depends for its enactment on a protracted series of carefully planned actions by a range of different people, each with their own part to play.

One common context for the performance and the recording of oral literature is on the occasion of large scale ceremonies not unlike that of the Lodagaa Bagre ceremonies or the boys' initiation among the Limba which take place only once a year or once in several years. Each such performance, together with any text that proceeds from it, depends on a similar coordination of effort and interest among a number of people, often over a long period, so that at the right time - 'on the night' - the performance can indeed materialize. This is so even when the exact timing (in an objective sense) of the start is not known in advance. Consider for instance the way the Fulani-Hausa oral court singers' contributions on the magnificent occasions of leading Muslim festivals depend on the coordination of a complex sequence of activities: the announcement by the emir of the sighting of the new moon by some specifically authorized person (one of his representatives or a learned malam), the communication of this announcement to those already preparing for the start of the performance, and the minstrels, already waiting in readiness, immediately starting on their performance (Abdulkadir 1975, p. 133). It seems immediate and carefree perhaps, but once again this

depends on the careful organization of the activities of a number of people: again 'art as collective action'.

The importance of organizing a performance through coordinating the activities of a number of people to a single point in time is not just a feature of large-scale annual ceremonies. It also applies to the literary performances of more select groups. In the Akan communities in West Africa, for instance, there is a strong tradition of people joining in special 'companies' such as military and hunting associations. Members of these companies come together for special meetings at which the celebrated Akan drum poems, among others, are performed.

Is the chief greater than the hunter?
Arrogance! Hunter? Arrogance!
That pair of beautiful things on your feet,
The sandals that you wear,
How did it all happen?
It is the hunter that killed the duyker:
The sandals are made of the hide of the duyker.
Does the chief say he is greater than the hunter?
Arrogance! Hunter? Arrogance!
The noisy train that leads you away,
The drums that precede you,
The hunter killed the elephant,
The drum head is the ear of the elephant.
Does the chief say he is greater than the hunter?
Arrogance! Hunter? Arrogance!

(Nketia 1963, p. 76).

The organization of such meetings and performances is not left to chance. There are a series of named officers and specialists with responsibilities for arranging such events, among them the master drummer, other expert drummers of various kinds, lead singers, and chorus. Besides regular meetings, members of the company are called together (with all the arranging this entails) for special occasions like the funeral of one of their members or notable success in the hunt. Nketia describes the complex organizing that is necessary:

A few weeks prior to the celebration which always takes place on a Thursday, 'the natal day' of the

elephant, the hunter (who must have previously sent presents of meat to both the head hunter and the chief of the town) now comes in person or sends a messenger with some drinks to the head hunter and informs him of his intention to celebrate his recent successes. The head hunter then accompanies the messenger to the chief and he and his elders are informed. The news is then passed on to all master hunters in the district, most of whom like to be present on such occasions to 'help' their fellow hunter, but more so to enjoy the fun of the celebration. Drummers and singers are invited.

When the day fixed for celebration approaches, the song dialogues already described are performed anew. The hunter with his attendants (boys in training) announces himself at the outskirts of town by firing a gun. He bursts into song:

Amofo, offspring of the father of mother Amofo,
Amofo, brother of Kwabena Ampadu,
Amofo, run and meet me with open arms,
For I have killed a powerful game.
Amofo, Amofo,
Please run and meet me.

He is met by a gang of people. There are exchanges of songs: recitations of praises, declamations, congratulations, etc. as before. He is carried shoulder high through the town, to a background of much singing, to the place of celebration where the chief and elders, master hunters, men, women and children are gathered. He goes round shaking hands while drummers and singers call to him with his own strong names and praise appellations....

The hunter is of course very busy, joining in the singing, alluding to his experiences in the lead to the chorus refrains, and dancing with a gun in his hand, making symbolic gestures, impersonating animals, and so on....

Even for this relatively specialist group note the amount of organizing or communication that was necessary to set up the event beforehand, and the number of people in different roles who had to interact on the day itself.

Even a performance which seems much more a spur-of-the-moment occurrence depends on a series of coordinated activities and prior organization. Take the Yoruba farà chants studied by Hans Wolff (among others). He describes these chants as performed during a festive gathering in the houses of some wealthy or influential notable; "at any time during the course of the party the singer may begin chanting. There is no theoretical length limit to a chant, and the same farà may be repeated, with variations, a good many times. When several performers are present, they often alternate in performing so that there may be chanting for the full duration of the festivities" (Wolff 1962, p. 50). But in fact, as Wolff further makes clear, specific events in time had to take place to make this apparently informal series of performances possible at all, and the singers had to be either specially invited or hear of the event through their communication network (sometimes within the same compound) so as to ensure being present. Furthermore, they must make sure that they have acquired beforehand the necessary knowledge of the history of the family they are visiting, including a large number of the names of family members, both dead and alive (Wolff 1962, p. 49), detailed information which takes time to acquire. Furthermore, such singers are experts who have had to learn their craft either through apprenticeship (for men) or by frequent practice and experiment (for women) over many years (Babalola 1973, p. 80). Top singers also try to arrange a drum accompaniment (yet more coordination needed for this) and in return the hosts must organize gifts of food, drinks and on occasion money (Babalola 1973, p. 81; Wolff 1962, p. 49). Once again a number of events in time must come together in a planned way for the farà texts recorded by Hans Wolff and others to be realized as an event in time, that is (for oral literature), to come into existence at all in any real sense.

Other literary events are in a sense initiated by individuals rather than dependent on a specific celebration. A Yoruba client goes to consult an Ifa diviner, thus setting

in train the recitation of one of the sets of the immense corpus of Ifa literature (see e.g. Bascom 1969; Abimbola 1976, 1977). A free lance itinerant singer among the Hausa or Fulani starts off a praise song in some public place, compelling his sometimes reluctant patron to hear and reward him (Smith 1967, Abdulkadir 1975). Again contemporary Mandinka singers themselves take the initiative in starting off performance sessions, sometimes indeed as a crafty prelude to draw the crowds and set up an occasion for political speeches by one of their patrons (Innes 1974, pp. 136-7). But here too, what might seem like an isolated act by a single individual also depends on a whole series of earlier events in time - especially the training and career of the expert singer himself, something often developed over many years and on innumerable occasions, each involving the same kind of coordination of mutual expectations or activities of others. It is not just anyone who can initiate an oral literary event or at any time--it must be someone with the appropriate background, the conventions about the right time and situation must be observed, the other people inevitably involved must broadly act within their accepted roles. It is not a case of a spontaneous or unplanned outburst to or from an undifferentiated public or outside the accepted temporal conventions.

Prior planning of a more direct kind also sometimes takes place even with relatively individual or small-scale performances. This brings up the somewhat controversial question of the extent and existence of prior composition in oral performances as against the view of some of the 'oral-formulaic' school (following the work of Parry and Lord) that composition-in-performance is the normal, possibly invariable, characteristic of oral literature. I do not intend to elaborate on this controversy here (having discussed it in a number of other places already, e.g. Finnegan 1977, chap. 3) except to comment that there do indeed seem to be some instances in African oral literature (as elsewhere) where composition divorced from, and prior to, the actual performance does appear to occur. In each case, this adds yet another temporal element to the preparation and coordination necessary for the realization of that particular piece of literature. To comment on just one example: some of the Dinka oral poems collected and published by Francis Deng (Deng 1973) are far from being

composed on the spot. A Dinka who needs a song for a particular purpose goes to an expert in composition to ask for a song. The expert composes it for him and those who are present are charged with the task of memorizing it for the individual client who then possesses it as his own song and can sing it on a later (probably already planned) occasion. Indeed even the composition itself may involve some considerable expenditure of time, for it can sometimes only be completed after a special investigation into the history of the family concerned (Deng 1973, pp. 78,85). Other recorded cases of prior composition - often extending over a lengthy period - can be found in studies of the Ila and Tonga of Central Africa, the Chopi of Mozambique (see e.g. Finnegan 1970, pp. 268 ff), the Bedouin (Meeker 1979, pp. 112 ff), and perhaps most interesting and best documented of all, the Somali (see e.g. Johnson 1974, pp. 12 ff, Andrzejewski and Lewis 1964, pp. 45 ff). These too - and I suspect that many other similar cases could be found - add yet another factor in the expenditure and planning of time that, however unmeasured by the clock, is a necessary condition for the realization of oral art as a specific event in time.

So far I have been speaking about oral poetry, which in general terms tends to be more highly regarded, specialist and hence, one would expect, more elaborately planned than the oral forms often classified as prose, in particular than stories. This latter is a form of African oral literature which, as you know, has been extensively documented at least in the sense of the publication of hundreds of volumes of texts of African narratives of one kind or another (some indication of the huge number of such collections can be seen in Scheub's recent bibliography, 1977). Do the unassuming tales also involve the kind of time budgeting and coordination of activities that emerged as a common pattern behind the performance of oral poems? It could well be assumed that, apart from the fact (significant enough in itself) that the original realization of the published texts must have been in an actual event in time, organization and coordination are not really necessary to any real extent.

Let me take the example of stories among the Limba. Here certainly, story-telling is on the relatively spontaneous end

of the spectrum, in contrast to the more formalized ceremonies for which the date is fixed beforehand. Yet, even in this case where rather than deciding beforehand to have a 'story-telling session' people often just slide into exchanging stories, often stimulated by young boys asking each other riddles, there are still temporal conventions that must be observed. There is the underlying requirement for many people's activities to be coordinated so that it becomes possible for people to be gathered together at the same time, otherwise story-telling would not be feasible, for it does not just 'happen' of itself.

Limba stories are not normally told during the day. This is not an absolute prohibition (it is in fact sometimes contravened, especially by children spending long hours in the fields chasing birds from the growing rice), but it is a generally observed convention among adults. The evening is thus the accepted time for stories - and this means that people must have come home to the village from working on their farms, which are often some miles from the village, and also be in the relaxed mood appropriate for enjoying story-telling. This in turn means that they must have had their main meal of the day (normally in the early evening) and this in its turn depends on a whole series of actions by a number of people: cooking, eating with the due forms (the father being served first and so on), clearing away; and behind this yet again lies all the organization necessary for acquiring the food and the means for cooking and preparing it: getting the firewood, the rice, the leaves for 'the sauce', pounding the rice, fetching the water (a time-consuming task for the women and children), making the fire, boiling the water, cooking the rice and sauce. Furthermore people are not really relaxed without a supply of palm wine in circulation and that depends on the daily evening visit of individual owners to their palm trees outside the village for the gourd they have left hanging to collect the wine during the day. These activities have to be coordinated and completed before there is even an opportunity for the telling of stories.

As well as all this, people have to be present in sufficient numbers to make telling and hearing stories a rewarding experience. Preferably this involves not just a narrator

