

## Text and Performance in Africa

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### Text and Performance

In written literary traditions the distinction between text and performance seems self-evident. The text is the permanent artifact, hand-written or printed, while the performance is the unique, never-to-be repeated realization or concretization of the text, a realization that “brings the text to life” but which is itself doomed to die on the breath in which it is uttered. Text fixes, performance animates. But even in written traditions, there are all kinds of different relations possible between a “text” and a “performance.” Written texts can be cues, scripts, or stimulants to oral performance, and can also be records, outcomes, or by-products of it. Even texts usually thought of as belonging purely within the written sphere can have a performative dimension. If, as is true in many traditions, text depends on performance and performance on text, comparative literary studies should help us to conceptualize the nature and degree of these varying relations of dependency.

The range of possibilities is wide. At one end of the spectrum are cases like sixteenth-century Italian *commedia dell'arte*, where the written script would be no more than a sheet of paper, listing the sequence of plot episodes and characters appearing in them. The actors would seize these sheets literally at the moment of walking onto the stage, scan them, and immediately begin to improvise (Duchartre 1966:30-32). The text here is essential, for it outlines the structure of the play, without which the actors would not be able to proceed. But the substance of the performance is supplied by the actors' repertoire of conventions, set pieces, gestures, quips, and gags constituting their verbal and gestural tradition. Although this repertoire was oral and embodied, it also incorporated *concetti*, verbal set pieces collected by the actors in their common-place books and cleverly designed to be adaptable to many situations. The aim was to master the rhetoric of the stage so well that the improvised passages were

indistinguishable in tone from pre-prepared written pieces (Lea 1962:105). Here written text infuses and underpins a tradition whose goal and end-product is a live performance. At the other end of the spectrum are forms like the nineteenth-century realist novel, where a lavishly specific and detailed written discourse creates a complete, credible, and autonomous textual world into which the reader is absorbed. But the narrative interest of this type of novel is founded, as Garrett Stewart observes, on a tension between the created fictional world and the text's continual solicitation of the reader to play a role in the reading event, "conscripting" him or her, through a complex array of rhetorical devices, to figure as participant in the constitution of the narrative: "you, reader, are therefore part of the script" (Stewart 1996:6). The written text not only offers the implied reader a series of positions in relation to itself, it also suggests how the act of reading should proceed and stimulates the actual reader to retain a consciousness, even in the most absorbing narratives, of his or her performance *as* a reader. Here the text specifies far more than the *commedia dell'arte* script: it not only creates a world but also instructs the reader how to participate in imaginatively realizing it.

Critical theory has proposed widely different models of the way written literary texts specify their own "performance" in acts of reading. To the philosopher R. G. Collingwood (1938), a true reading (whether of a literary text or a painting) was totally specified by the text, for it resulted from the reader's act of *re-creation* of the work of art, retracing the same steps by which the artist originally constituted the text or image. It was thus a performance of the act of artistic creation, scripted by every detail of the work of art itself. Post-structuralist criticism would say almost the opposite: that a rewarding ("writerly") text is one which stimulates the reader to do his or her *own* acts of creation, stimulated but not constrained by the text—and often emerging at a tangent or in opposition to its ostensible project (Barthes 1974).

Literary theorists, then, have been ready to embrace the idea that written texts provoke, entail, or coexist with some kind of performative dimension. However, they have been less ready to contemplate the corresponding claim, that performances within oral traditions entail some kind of textual dimension.

In oral traditions the co-presence of performance and text is of course more difficult to see, because there is no visible, tangible document to contrast with the evanescent utterance. Nonetheless, it is clear that what happens in most oral performances is not pure instantaneity, pure evanescence, pure emergence and disappearance into the vanishing moment.

The exact contrary is usually the case. There is a performance—but it is a performance *of* something. Something identifiable is understood to have pre-existed the moment of utterance. Or, alternatively, something is understood to be constituted in utterance that can be abstracted or detached from the immediate context and re-embodied in a future performance. Even if the only place this “something” can be held to exist is in people’s minds or memories, still it is surely distinguishable from immediate, and immediately-disappearing, actual utterance. It can be referred to. People may speak of “the story of Sunjata” or “the praises of Dingaan” rather than speaking of a particular narrator’s or praise-singer’s performance on a particular occasion. And this capacity to be abstracted, to transcend the moment, and to be identified independently of particular instantiations, is the whole point of oral traditions. They are “traditions” because they are known to be shared and to have been handed down; they can be shared and handed down because they have been constituted precisely in order to be detachable from the immediate context, and are capable of being transmitted in time and disseminated in space. Creators and transmitters of oral genres use every resource at their disposal to consolidate utterance into quasi-autonomous texts.

If there is unease with the idea of oral genres as texts, this is a legacy of the long and ultimately successful battle that folklore and performance theory waged from the 1960s onwards against an impoverishing scriptocentric approach to orality. The exhilarating discovery of the importance of “composition *in* performance,” of improvisation, of interaction with the audience, of gesture, tempo, rhythm, and bodily expression, of the emergent and the processual, meant that performance theory, at least in its early stages, was adamantly opposed to anything resembling literary criticism’s concept of “text.” There were times when it came close to conducting a witch-hunt against this concept, which, along with “structure,” “object,” “fixity,” and “system,” was held to distort and reify the fluid, emergent, improvisatory, dialogic, and embodied nature of performance. Text and performance were seen not only as radically distinct, but as each others’ enemies. But since the battle for a performative approach has more or less been won, it is now becoming possible to reunite these artificially separated concepts. On the one hand, a more flexible and inclusive definition of “text” has been proposed that is not confined to written or even to verbal discourse: W. F. Hanks (1989:95) offers as a working definition “any configuration of signs that is coherently interpretable by some community of users”—encompassing not only oral and written discourses of innumerable types but also painting, music, and film. On the other hand, anthropologists working with oral traditions have begun to try to explain how the evanescent,

momentary performance can nonetheless be regarded as something abstracted or detached from the flow of everyday discourse. We have begun to see how work goes into constituting oral genres as something capable of repetition, evaluation, and exegesis—that is, something that can be treated as the *object* of commentary—by the communities that produce them, and not just by the collector or ethnographer.

The possibility of thinking about text in these terms has been greatly expanded recently by the notion of “entextualization” developed by American linguistic anthropologists (see especially Silverstein and Urban 1996). Entextualization is the “process of rendering a given instance of discourse as text, detachable from its local context” (*ibid.*:21). The more detachable a stretch of discourse is, the more shareable and transmittable it becomes (Urban 1991). The mechanisms of entextualization identified by Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban are linguistic choices that limit deixis and other forms of dependence on the immediate context. Thus, discourse that is couched in the third person is more detachable than discourse in the first and second persons, which tends to evoke a response from the hearer, sucking the discourse into the here-and-now. Declarative sentences rather than interrogative, the far past tense rather than the present or perfect, are conducive to detachability. Myths, set in the remote past about third persons in a place far from the present speakers and hearers, are the quintessential example of entextualized discourse, and discourse collectively produced is more independent of the immediate context than individual utterance: thus, some traditions of myth telling require a “what-sayer” or prompter to underline the fact that the narrative is shared by the community who have a collective responsibility to bring it out (Urban 1996:39-40).

Perhaps because the key ethnographic examples in Silverstein and Urban’s volume are threatened or vanishing cultures in North, Central, and South America, much of the discussion of entextualization revolves around the processes of elicitation, recording, and transcription of narratives from a few individuals. There is a hesitation in the volume between treating entextualization as a process of cultural constitution that occurs within all cultures including wholly oral ones and treating it more narrowly as the process of turning oral discourses into “texts” by writing them down. The latter perspective raises important issues to do with how potential “texts” are identified and defined, and how the collaborative interaction of native speaker and ethnographer shapes the final product. But for the purposes of this argument, it is the former, more inclusive notion of entextualization that is more productive.

A look at African oral genres reveals a wide repertoire of strategies of entextualization, not all of which involve the third person or the remote past. Indeed, praise poetry, one of the most widespread African genres, of central importance in social and political life, could hardly be more different from the Amerindian myth used as model of entextualized discourse. Praise poetry is notable for its vocative, second-person address and for its simultaneous evocation of the past and the present, bringing the powers and potentials of dead predecessors into the center of the living community. Text is consolidated and rendered detachable from its immediate context—but only so that it can be re-activated and re-embedded in a new context of utterance, where it has an effectual engagement and dialogic force. The various strategies of entextualization in genres of African praise poetry could be enumerated and illustrated at length; however, what I propose to do here is rather to try to identify their common, underlying mode of operation. This is to render discourse *object-like*: by making it the focus of *commentary* and exegetical attention, or by presenting text as *quotable*, thus foregrounding the perception that these words pre-existed their present moment of utterance and could also continue to exist after it.

In sketching out this mode, I want to emphasize that in constituting text as object-like, these African genres do *not* forego the fluidity and improvisatory quality that performance theory has so successfully explored. Rather, it is the very consolidation of chunks of examinable, quotable, repeatable text that makes possible the dynamic processes of fluid incorporation, re-inflection, and recycling that are the hallmark of praise poetry performance across the continent. Thus, rather than seeking to replace a processual model of oral genres with one of writing-like fixity, I aim to show that constituting text as object-like is the condition of possibility of a poetics of fluidity. A further point, which will need to be developed in future work, is that the techniques of entextualization under discussion involve a certain reflexivity—a consciousness of text as something created in order to be expounded, recontextualized, and reflected upon. Attention to these techniques could, therefore, potentially provide clues to the modes of self-understanding and self-interpretation of the collectivities that create them.

### **Texts Attached to Objects**

The most vivid indication of the desire to consolidate fleeting speech is the widespread practice of attaching verbal formulations to actual material objects. The vast number of varied and ingenious text-objects that flourish in sub-Saharan Africa testifies to the impulse to generate verbal formulations

that pass over space and time by means of an objective correlative. The Luba *lukasa* board, Zulu bead messages, Dahomeyan *récades* or message-staffs, Asante *adinkra* symbols, gold weights and umbrella finials, and a host of other material repositories and memory-prompts operate in different ways to transcend time, to fix or trap text in a material form. Kwesi Yankah (1994) describes a system by which, in certain parts of the Akan-speaking area of Ghana, newly-coined sayings were “registered” by being associated with a mnemonic object that would then be hung on a string from the ceiling of a proverb-custodian’s house. For example, a woman divorced and remarried three times to the same man coined the ironical saying “the hollow bone—when you lick it, your lips hurt; when you leave it, your eyes trail it.” The proverb-custodian registered this saying by hanging an actual bone up on his string. If visitors asked about the bone, it would prompt the proverb-custodian to give an account of the woman and the circumstances in which she coined the saying, as well as the saying itself. The proverb is thus triply objectified. It arises out of a material object—the bone (or the idea of the bone), which inspired the woman’s metaphorical utterance. It is recalled by an equivalent material object—the bone on the custodian’s string. And it is reactivated by a contextualizing discourse that takes the proverb as itself an object—the object of attention, explanation, and evaluation.

The object—the bone on the string—is more than a mnemonic. It seems to present itself as a puzzle and a challenge: why is it there? What explanation can be given for its presence on the custodian’s string? The suspended objects prompt questions from visitors that the custodian seeks to answer as fully as he can. In turn, the proverb attached to the bone itself provokes and requires explanation. Like the bone, it is presented as an opaque object whose meaning only becomes apparent when it is bathed in a sea of contextual and historical detail, which is not encoded *within* the object or the proverb but is transmitted in another genre—the personal narrative—that runs alongside them.

### **Obscurity and Exegesis**

This association of verbal texts with actual objects can be seen not as a quaint mnemonic system but as the most visible form of a much wider impulse to consolidate spoken words into compact formulations requiring subsequent expansion or elaboration on the part of the interpreter. The exegesis can take place within the text or in another genre outside it. The

need for commentary is enhanced when the formulation is allusive, opaque,

truncated, or otherwise obscure.

A highly characteristic feature of praise poetry in Africa is the nominalized statement, a sentence converted into an epithet. In the process of conversion, the statement becomes compacted; it loses its temporal markers and becomes an allusion to a timeless state of being. Thus, the Yorùbá *oriki* (attribution or appellation) *Dínà-má-yà* (“block-road-not-budge”) is a nominalization derived from the sentence “Ó dínà, kò sì yà”: “he blocked the road and he didn’t budge.” A statement referring to an event in time performed by an agent is converted into an epithet with the markers of pronominal agency and verbal aspect removed. Thus, events are turned into qualities; things that occurred in time become atemporal attributes. The nominalized epithet or passage floats above specific contexts of action, suggesting that the owner of the epithet exists in a permanent state of being eligible for that attribution. This form of entextualization is comparable to the constitution of mythic discourse discussed by Silverstein and Urban (1996). But it has a further and more powerful entextualizing effect: compacted utterances of this kind leave a lot out. The actions and events that gave rise to them are not recuperable from the words themselves. They hint at narratives but do not tell them. The art of exegesis, then, is to expand these laconic formulations and re-install the agent and his or her context of action.

The *oriki* “block-road-not-budge” is coupled with another epithet, *A-dóminú-kojo*, “one who fills the coward with apprehension.” These praises belong to Wínyọmí, a great nineteenth-century hunter of Òkukù, and his descendants.<sup>1</sup> They clearly signal some kind of courageous deed; but only when they are expanded by means of a separate genre, the *itàn* or narrative, do they acquire full meaning. Wínyọmí had a friend in a neighboring town whose son, a masquerader, killed a man during an outing of the ancestral masquerades. The guilty man, knowing Wínyọmí’s reputation as a formidable fighter and medicine man, ran to him for refuge. The relatives of the dead man then marched to Òkukù *en masse* to demand that Wínyọmí hand over the killer. Wínyọmí came out to meet them, stood in the middle of the road, and said “I am going to close my eyes, and when I open them you will all have disappeared.” Such terror did this threat inspire that the entire crowd fled, making Wínyọmí’s prediction come true. The brief couplet of epithets—*Dínà-má-yà*, *a-dóminú-kojo*—thus has its own narrative context, independent of the concrete context of performance. It does not depend on other attributions within the performance for its meaning, nor on the context

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the *oriki*-text from which this brief excerpt was taken, see Barber 1991:196-99.

in which it is uttered. The “obscurity” of such epithets lies in the fact that the narrative expansion occurs outside the text itself. The knowledgeable listener has to know the story in order to make full sense of the epithet. There is a division of labor in the constitution of textual meaning, which is heightened by the fact that in Òkukù, while *oriki* are most often performed by women, *itàn* are most often recounted by elderly men.<sup>2</sup> Exegesis is therefore built into the constitution of the meaning, and exegesis involves treating the epithet as an object of attention and explication. Yorùbá people are often very ready to offer ingenious exegeses, which sometimes involve analysis of each of the syllables of such phrases as *Dínà-má-yà*.

Conversely, when male elders tell the history of the lineage, their *itàn* often depend on *oriki* to move from point to point. A narrator may recount a historical episode and then conclude: “and that is why we are called such-and-such.” Or he may introduce a new episode by naming a character in the narrative, citing one of his or her praise-epithets, and then explaining its meaning. Ajíbóyè, of the royal lineage in Òkukù, did both in one episode of the legendary origins of the town and the royal family. He began the episode by announcing: “One of [the town’s] *oriki* is *àyàbùèrò*.” This epithet is an oddly constructed expression the meaning of which is not immediately apparent. Having presented this puzzle, Ajíbóyè went on to explain (adapted from Barber 1991:65):

This is because of a famous flood. The river Ọtin flowed near the town. One year it rained and rained and the river flooded everybody’s backyard and all the hen-houses, goat-pens, and dove-cotes were carried away. But after about twelve days, when the flood subsided, all the animals were still alive. The river was recognized as a beneficent one and was honored with the name *à yà bù èrò*: “the thing-that-is-stopped-for-and-scooped belonging to strangers” [i.e., the river whose waters strangers stop to drink].

Like the bone that triggered the divorced-and-remarried woman’s proverb, the epithet functions as the kernel of a narrative, and is both the trigger and the punch-line of Ajíbóyè’s story. Rather than just repeating the *oriki*, he

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<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon of the distribution of textual meaning-production between two distinct and separately institutionalized genres may offer a helpful way of looking at some of the relationships between written text and performance mentioned above. One could think of the *commedia dell’arte*, for example, not only as a relationship between “text” and “performance” (though it obviously is this), but also as a case where the constitution of the drama is *distributed* between two textual genres—one written and the other oral, neither of the two having priority.



quotes it, explicitly acknowledging it as text that pre-existed the present moment of utterance.<sup>3</sup> Having quoted it, he reinforces its consolidation as text by bringing it under exegetical scrutiny.

This relationship between utterance and exegesis is a constitutive feature of praise poetry all over sub-Saharan Africa. Most African praise poetry is constituted to be obscure, opaque, or allusive. The *ajogan* songs of the kings of Porto Novo were “deliberately allusive, even hermetic” (Rouget 1971:32). Ila elders in Zambia will regard a praise poem “which is immediately self-evident and which lacks layers of allusion as ipso facto uninteresting” (Rennie 1984). The reciters of the *apae* praises of Akan royalty and chiefs have a special vocabulary to “conceal the messages” (Arhin 1986:167); and according to one of Anyidoho’s informants, “the composition of each *apae* was motivated by a particular historical event. Therefore, apart from committing texts to memory, a good performer should also have a grasp of the incidents that motivated them” (1993:119). The explanation of the *apae* is thus found in the narrative of its origin, and the two bodies of information—the praises and the narratives—are learned and transmitted in parallel. Where the parallel explanatory tradition is inaccessible or lost, the praise texts remain opaque: for example, in the Kuba kingdom, songs in praise of the monarchs, taught verbatim to the royal wives by a female official, often “consist of allusions” whose “explanation . . . is not a part of the teaching itself,” so that “it is difficult to use them” for historical reconstruction (Vansina 1978:23).

*Mbiimbi*, the dynastic poetry of the Yaka-speaking Lunda conquerors in the southwest of the Democratic Republic of Congo, “insinuates the facts rather than describing them, rather than relating or explaining them in the manner of an historic recitation” (N’Soko Swa-Kabamba 1997). Instead of referring to heroic ancestors by their names, the composer-performer of *mbiimbi* may evoke them by “power names” or by emblematic devices. Nominalized forms, as in all praise poetry, are forms of avoidance as well as forms of honorific elaboration: they give the subject aliases. Consider the lines (N’Soko Swa-Kabamba 1997:152):

Oh he-who-floats-across-the-river  
shoot that floated in the company of the aquatic reed  
oh chameleon, what did you see in me, Nteeba?

This is about a king, Muloombo, who, we are told, reigned from 1902 to 1913. He was deported by the Belgian authorities after decapitating two of

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<sup>3</sup> For a fuller exploration of quotation in the constitution of Yorùbá oral genres, see Barber 1999.

their colonially-imposed chiefs. The nominalized form “he-who-floats-across-the river” is amplified and elaborated by the next line, “shoot that floated in the company of the aquatic reed”: they allude to the fact that Muloombo was exiled by river. The third line relies on popular knowledge that Muloombo was called “chameleon” because of his elegant and majestic walk. But this information is not contained within the text; as N’Soko Swa-Kabamba says, one would not know what it referred to without knowledge of another tradition, the *nsámu mya tsyá khúlu* or “tale from other times.”

More limited expansion can also take place *within* a praise poetry text. A very common mode of textual constitution is to present a compact, obscure nominalized epithet and then proceed to expand and contextualize it in the subsequent text. Thus, in Asante *apae* “almost every line begins with some nominal which is then explained or elaborated in the form of a succeeding adjectival clause” (Anyidoho 1993:372). For example, *Okoro-man-so-fone* (“the one who goes to a town and causes everyone to [become] emaciate[d]”) is elaborated with *A wo ne no twe manso wofon* (“if you have a legal battle with him, you [become] emaciated[d]”). The second line explains the context—litigation—in which the subject’s devastating impact on other people is felt; without this elaboration, the praise epithet would be both bald and puzzling. Similarly, in Xhosa *izibongo*, a standard mode of textual constitution is to present a compact, baffling nominalized expression and then attach a brief commentary: “Blankets [on] head: some talk about them, others actually carry them” or “Swollen-legs: a defect that is apart from other defects” (Kuse 1979:212, 210). In what Kuse calls “complex eulogues,” the elaboration of the nominalized epithet may take the form of an extended narrative, associated more loosely with it. These internal expansions present and consolidate the text without fully constituting its meaning. In both Asante and Xhosa cases (and in many other parallel cases from elsewhere in Africa) it seems clear that there are several kinds of expansion, elaboration, and exegesis built up in layers around the core nominalized epithet—some within the text and some carried in a parallel narrative tradition outside it. Obscurity—the presentation of a laconic, incomplete, and allusive expression—is thus at the very center of a complex mode of textual constitution.

Obscurity in praise poetry could be deployed for political reasons. It could be used to encode discreet criticisms of royal and dynastic power (see Vail and White 1991). Conversely, it could be used by the ruling group to flaunt the existence, while guarding the content, of secrets understood to be the basis of their power (Arhin 1986). But underlying this, I suggest, is the more fundamental question of the very mode by which text is constituted to

transcend time and space. Obscurity provokes the listener into acts of exegesis that consolidate the utterance as an object of attention.

As with external commentary, internal commentary can involve a mode of quotation. Nominalization can, as it were, round up a stretch of discourse, assess it for relevance to the subject, and announce the appropriateness of its attribution to him or her. Thus a Yorùbá praiser can say (adapted from Barber 1991:69):

“Ó gbó sésé Ifá ó yalé  
 Ó gbèhinkùlé moye odù tó hù  
 ‘Àìgbófá là á n wòkè, Ifá kan ò sí n párá’”  
 Ló tó Babaa Fárónké še.

“He hears the chink of the divining chain, he stops to come in  
 From out in the yard he already knows what figure has emerged  
 ‘Not knowing Ifá, we gaze up, but there’s no Ifá in the rafters’”  
 This is what Father of Fárónké is worthy to be called.

At first blush, the opening two lines of this excerpt sound like propositional statements about a person; the third line is a proverb, used with characteristic Yorùbá inversion to suggest that the subject, *unlike* the people referred to in the proverb, is deeply versed in Ifá. But having uttered these three lines, the performer then declares that this is what the subject is worthy to be called—retrospectively rounding up the entire formulation and offering it to the subject as an attribution that evokes his qualities. Thus the statements not only function as epithets or name-equivalents but are produced as quoted text—text which is acknowledged to have pre-existed the present moment of utterance and which is presented, evaluated, and attributed to a subject. These formulations are in fact part of the *oríkí*-singer’s repertoire and can be applied to anyone whose skill as a diviner merits it; in the very act of attribution, she highlights this fact, drawing attention to the pre-existence of the formulation, to its character as already-constituted text.

The power of the concept of quotation is that it captures simultaneously the process of detachment and the process of recontextualization. A quotation is only a quotation when it is inserted into a new context. Thus, in the very act of recognizing a stretch of discourse as having an independent existence, the quoter is re-embedding it. This, I suggest, helps us to understand how “text” (the detachable, de-contextualized stretch of discourse) and “performance” (the act of assembling and mobilizing discursive elements) are two sides of a coin, inseparable and mutually constitutive.

For the dense, compacted, “objectified” utterances I have been discussing can be mobilized in performances of extraordinary fluidity, dynamism, and dialogicality. A performance of *oríki*—and, though perhaps to a lesser extent, many other genres of African praise poetry—is a stringing together of autonomous fragments, which in principle could be performed in any order, any selection, any combination. The compact incompleteness and allusiveness of the formulations makes them mobile in relation to each other, for each points outwards to its own narrative hinterland for expansion and exegesis. In *oríki* there is a particular emphasis on profusion, for in this culture of competition between self-aggrandizing “big men” the more *oríki* that are heaped upon the addressee’s head the more his aura will be enhanced in relation to his rivals. This means that performers do not confine themselves to an authorized corpus for each subject, but raid other subjects’ *oríki*, and indeed other verbal genres such as proverbs, riddles, and Ifá verses, for material to add to the flow. There is a pervasive intertextuality in which incorporated elements are partially, but not fully, subordinated to the project of the incorporating genre, casting a haze of “quotedness” over the whole field of Yorùbá orature (Barber 1999).

The coherence of the *oríki*-performance derives from the presence—actual or virtual—of the addressed subject in whom all the attributions converge, and from the élan with which a skilled performer will throw out slender, temporary links between attributions based on similarities of sound or sense. The performer engages the addressee in an intense, dyadic relationship, with unwavering eye contact. She or he is intensely responsive to the presence of the addressee—often exhorting, blessing, or thanking him, and sometimes switching to a new subject when a more important personality enters the performance space. Yet throughout her intense address to her chosen subject, she is assembling a heterogeneous, composite flow of materials that incorporate quotations from numerous sources and are often compacted, incomplete, and obscure. The result is that the *oríki* are constituted as something that floats above the actual context of utterance, escaping the concrete dialogic situation in which it is delivered, transcending time, and presenting itself as an object requiring exegesis. Yet it is this fugitive, fragmented, and migratory quality of *oríki* that also makes it so intensely a performance in the here and now—emergent, variable, constituted out of contingency, and forged moment to moment as the performer seizes materials with which to respond to the presence of her addressee.

The purpose of this paper, then, has been to show not just that oral performances can profitably be seen as performances of “texts,” but also that

in the case of African oral praise poetry at least, it is entextualization—achieved through the consolidation of discourse as object of exegesis and as quotation—that makes possible an intensely fluid and dynamic realization of the text in performance. Entextualization, then, is not the opposite of emergent performance, but rather its alter ego; they proceed hand in glove with each other and are the condition of each other's possibility. For text must be treated as the object of attention—by exegesis and by being quoted in new contexts of utterance—in order to attain meaning; while a performance that was truly ephemeral would be a performance of nothing.

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