

Paradigms of Social Aesthetics in Themne Oral Performance

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Introduction: The Artistic Variation Imperative

The Themne belong to the Mande-speaking group of West Africa, part of the Bantu group (see Asher and Moseley 1993). They are one of the two largest of the 16 ethnic groups present in Sierra Leone, and constitute about 30 percent of Sierra Leone's total population of 5.4 million. They predominate in the northern region of the country.

Themne social and cultural traditions include "secret" societies,¹ mask devils,² and folklore practices and genres like storytelling, dirges, poetry, dances, songs, and folk theatre. As with other ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, most traditional Themne folklore is handed down by means of storytelling. In almost all communities, whether rural or urban, storytelling serves a plethora of functions: social, mythopoetic, pedagogical, recreational, artistic, and aesthetic (see also Sieber 1971, Bauman 1983, Finnegan 1992a and b, Okpewho 1990). The Themne, like other cultures in Sierra Leone and indeed throughout Africa, are a predominantly non-literate society that is gradually being exposed to audiovisual mass media forms of entertainment including the cinema, television, video, radio, and, very recently, mobile phones (see UNESCO 1990, Khan 1997a and b, also Mushengyezi 2003).³ This exposure has placed greater demands on Themne oral art practitioners to make their material and performance more attractive to their clientele, particularly to the younger generation, as has been observed elsewhere. The latter constitutes the larger part of the Themne population, and, as the school-going age group is exposed to literate media entertainment forms, it is increasingly likely to lose interest in traditional folklore practices, as has been the case with storytelling in post-war technological societies in the West (for a similar observation among the Irish-Gaelic storytelling traditions, see Delargy 1945).

¹ Secret societies are traditional cultural groups that maintain secrecy in their ritual and initiation practices.

² "Mask devil" refers to a masquerade.

³ Mushengyezi argues that a combination of widespread non-literacy and poverty among Ugandans permits indigenous media to continue to be a viable means of public communication. Though poverty is dominant in Sierra Leone, the use of radio and mobile phone technology is widespread even in remote rural areas and plays a central part in public and interpersonal communication. The same writer infers, however, that the advent of new technology is a potential threat to the use of indigenous media among younger generations of Ugandans.

Compounding this setback to increased oral art appreciation by audiences is the nature of oral art itself, which is subject to diminishing marginal returns since it is constantly being repetitively reproduced and recycled from one generation to another (Avorgbedor 1990, Agovi 1995, Ben-Amos 1984). Repetitive exposure to the same materials or their varieties often leads to monotony and lack of interest on the part of the same audiences. As a consequence, the performance of such materials and their sustained popularity with stable audiences increasingly hinges on the ability of Themne oral artists to vary their material and make it more captivating or marketable to their audiences.

However, mass non-literacy, availability of modern media, an increased youthful population, and a desire to minimize performance monotony are not the only impetus for African oral artists' craftsmanship. As this study argues, aesthetic considerations also play a critical role in their deployment of multimedia to realize creativity and achieve artistic variation. It is in this way that oral artists elaborate and improvise during oral performances, thereby continuing to engage their audiences. Specifically, I will examine the social aesthetic paradigms of sociability, the physical setting of the performance, and the belief system or worldview of the Themne, and consider the ways in which these factors engender artistic variation and creativity. I will also consider the ramifications of social aesthetics and multimedia for the audiences' appreciation and interpretation of the oral performance. My social aesthetic inquiry will not focus on an analysis of story texts *per se*, but on the physical setting and sociocultural conventions of Themne storytelling practices. The focus is on aspects of social aesthetics that impinge on artistic variation and creativity in storytelling and on processes of active audience participation in the delivery and interpretation of oral performances. I hope that such an analysis of the Themne oral artist's ability to exploit the aesthetic resources of the performance setting will lend weight to calls for scholars to pay due attention to the uniqueness of each performance and to capture, transcribe, and translate the "externalities" of a given performance as deployed by the oral artist.⁴

Aesthetics, Timing of Performance, and Sociability

I will begin with the social and sociability function of storytelling, which is a dominant feature of Themne social aesthetics and receptionalism. It both underpins the Themne concept of oral art practice and accounts for the importance accorded to the physical setting of storytelling performances. In this regard I employ the term "receptionalism" as used by John Miles Foley (1986, 1991, 1995) to embody the processes employed by audiences to interpret and appreciate oral performances. It also incorporates what Thomas Dubois (1996) refers to as "native hermeneutics," a term that designates the norms and principles employed by audiences for constructing or arriving at a meaning during a given performance.

I have coined the term "social aesthetics" to refer to the appreciation for, and utilization of, social interaction or socialization within a given sociocultural milieu or tradition. It is coterminous with the enjoyment derived by individuals and communities from sociocultural

⁴ Muana 1998a, Barber 2005, Finnegan 2005, Schieffelin 2005, Hunter and Oumarou 1998, and Foley 1986, 1991.

activities such as oral art forms. In this sense, it contrasts with material aesthetics, which addresses the production and appreciation of tangible art forms such as sculpture and carving. Moreover, it differs from verbal aesthetics associated with artistic or poetic language and usually realized through the use of linguistic and extralinguistic resources (see Hunter and Oumarou 1998).

Social aesthetics is essential for the collective participation of both the oral artists and their audiences in the delivery of an oral art form as a performance. This is usually realized through the use of other multimedia material paraphernalia such as musical instruments and costumes. When employed in this way, the material paraphernalia lend support to the sociability and entertainment dimensions, among others, of oral art performances. Inasmuch as material culture complements the social aesthetics of the performance, the concept of social aesthetics as used here derives from sociability mechanisms such as communal entertainment and collective artistry⁵ through the use of multimedia and paralinguistic resources (gestures and other body movements), as well as other shared generic conventions of performance. In simple terms, social aesthetics implies the whole gamut of sociocultural conventions, patterns, and practices that embody the appreciation and production of cultural norms and practices, as well as entertainment and social interaction among individuals or communities.

The intrinsic sociability element of Themne storytelling is largely due to the interplay between vocational, climatological, and sociocultural factors. Themneland's economy is mainly agricultural, with crop farming, animal husbandry, and fishing as the three main income-generating activities. Other economies include small trading and small-scale mineral mining. Storytelling, like other folklore performances, serves a recreational and entertainment purpose. The sessions allow people to relax with food and drink, and are held in the evening or at night following a busy day's work on the farm and at sea.⁶ For example, an anonymous storyteller in the *Themne Stories* collection underlines this view by reminding the audience-participants from the outset of the social and recreational value of performing the folktale entitled *The Girl Who Chose A Husband On Her Own* (Turay 1989:51):

We are only gathered here to entertain ourselves.
So everyone can have the opportunity of a smile.
If anyone has problems, he will forget about them.

Complementing the vocational exigencies for nighttime storytelling in Themneland is the aesthetic factor. It is the norm, particularly in rural areas, for storytelling to take place in the evening and at night, around a fire, and by moonlight.⁷ Against the aesthetic backdrop of

⁵ The term is used here in the sense developed by Richard Bauman (1986), who refers to all aspects of participation, such as providing a chorus, filling in missing details, interjections, mimicry, and dancing by both audience and storyteller in delivering and performing a story.

⁶ Predominantly in the Themne coastal areas of northwestern Sierra Leone, as has been observed elsewhere (see Bruford 1994; Okpewho 1990, 1992; Finnegan 1970, 1992a and b; Bauman 1983, 1986, 1997).

⁷ For similar observations in other cultures, see Okpewho 1990, 1992; Finnegan 1970, 1992a and b; Bruford 1994; Delargy 1945.

moonlight and wood fire, families, neighbors, and community members converge to socialize and perform stories and other related folklore genres such as poetry, riddles, and proverbs.⁸ The aesthetic impetus for storytelling and its inherent sociability for the community are encapsulated in the Themne proverb: “When the moon is out, the loner longs for a storytelling performance with their kin.”

The Themne consider it unsociable to perform stories in poor light or in complete darkness, and very few instances of storytelling are held under a “dark moon.”⁹ Performers and audiences who were interviewed claimed that poor light or darkness is unmotivating and uninspiring to their creative impulse and artistry, and instances were observed during fieldwork where performances were called off or abandoned midway through a story due to a shortage of firewood or the moon going behind a cloud for a long period, thus leading to poor light. For example, Kamanda Bongay (henceforth known as Bongay), a well-known Themne storyteller in his community of Mahera, a coastal town, constantly resisted pleas from his audience-participants to continue to perform in poor light. Inducements to lure him to start or even to finish a performance begun before the onset of poor light ranged from providing substitutes like hurricane lanterns or a *gbem-gbeh lamp* to offering him an abundant supply of free *omole* and cannabis.¹⁰

A recurring reason for Bongay’s refusal to perform under dark or poor natural light was that it prevented eye contact between artist and audience. He argued that a lack of visibility would hinder the ability of both audience and performer to adequately explore the extralinguistic multimedia resources, especially sensorial ones, crucial for artistic improvisation and appreciation of the performance (see Finnegan 2005). In this culture, therefore, as has been observed elsewhere by Foley (1986, 1991) and others, the active role of the audience is crucial for the realization and reception of the artistic, aesthetic, and interpretative experience of the performance as an oral tradition. Bongay and other storytellers also claimed that despite the proximity between performer and audience, poor light makes it difficult for them to evaluate the performance and for the storyteller to evaluate the audience’s reaction to his delivery. Themne folktale performers consider extralinguistic improvisation and audience feedback as critical to the aesthetic animation of the performance and to enhancing its collective artistic delivery (see also Yankah 1995; Finnegan 2005).

In addition to the proxemic, spatial, and temporal domains of a socially aesthetic performance, many Themne storytelling audiences explained during interviews that their aversion to performing stories in the dark, without moonlight ambience, resembled an exercise

⁸ For other non-Themne parallels among other Sierra Leonean cultures, see Muana 1998b; Finnegan 1970, 1992a and b.

⁹ In Themne parlance, “dark moon” refers to the period in the lunar cycle when the moon is either non-existent or appears late in the night or is not visible.

¹⁰ Bongay was a habitual user of cannabis. *Gbem-gbeh lamp* is a locally made naked-flame paraffin lantern made from recycled tins and cans. *Omole* is a type of down-market, spirit-based alcoholic drink that is locally distilled by crude methods.

“in a school where stories are read and not performed” (Khan 1991-96). This view underlines the artistic philosophy of most professional and amateur storytellers alike: that narrating stories without performing them would subvert their social import. I also observed that audience-participants gave prominence to the mimetic realization of a story and the diegetic dimension over the mere telling of the story.¹¹ The general consensus was that “dark moon” storytelling would hinder the storytellers’ ability to deploy multimedia resources in an innovative manner in order to vary their material. More significantly, they argued that this aberrant practice is likely to endanger the social aesthetic benefits of storytelling.

The social aesthetics of storytelling around a fire and/or by moonlight explains why the dry season is most conducive to storytelling and other verbal art activities among the Themne. As open air or outdoor social events, performances depend on dry weather, which is rare during the alternating rainy season, when rural communities are preoccupied with farm work—agriculture being the main occupation of both storytellers and potential participants. There are therefore comparatively more communal storytelling activities during the dry season.

The break in agricultural activities provides an opportunity for amateur and professional storytellers to while away the time, practice their art, and augment their income. Moreover, at the onset of the dry period, more food and money is accrued from agro-based enterprises. This makes it possible for festivals to take place that are steeped in storytelling and other traditional folklore forms of entertainment. These include family festivals, weddings, initiations, and rites of passage or graduation ceremonies from traditional societies (see Conteh-Morgan and Dixon-Fyle 1999). For example, Denkena—another prominent professional Themne storyteller—is also a commercial rice farmer. His itinerary for storytelling largely covers the period in between farming activities and after the harvest in the months of December through April (for similar practice among the Irish-Gaelic cultures, see Delargy 1945).

In Themneland, storytelling as a folkloric entertainment medium is a key accompaniment to other communal social gatherings.¹² Instances of the connection of the performers’ choice of folklore material, content, and style of delivery to the appropriateness of social event or function abound during fieldwork. In particular, I observed Bongay and Denkena varying the themes and style of their delivery in relation to the social occasions that were either at hand or underway in their communities. Thus, in the multiple performance of the folktale entitled *The Girl Who Chose A Husband On Her Own*, I observed Denkena varying the characters, themes, songs, and moral lessons depending on celebrations underway in the communities in which he was performing.¹³ In one performance the main character is a young girl in puberty, who after graduating from the *Bondo*¹⁴ chose a husband based purely on good looks rather than on good character. The tale’s

¹¹ As has been observed in other cultures (see Finnegan 1992a and b; Okpewho 1990, 1992; Bauman and Briggs 1990).

¹² As has been observed elsewhere in Scheub 1985; Finnegan 1970; Okpewho 1990.

¹³ For a similar observation of songs among Balto-Finnic cultures and their interpretation by audiences, see Dubois 1996.

¹⁴ A female circumcision rite of passage usually characterized by festivity.

thematic focus on deviance not only was foregrounded by the *Bondo* ceremony that was underway in Mahera, but also served as a moral warning to all girls in the audience against indulging in similar action after graduating from the *Bondo*. In fact, Denkena made numerous references to the girl initiates as likely to behave in similar fashion to his main character in the tale. In another performance of the same tale that coincided with the death of a young bride in the same town, Dekena changes the theme of the story to insinuate that the young bride's death might have been caused by her co-wives, who might have resorted to foul play or the casting of an evil spell to bring it about. Again Denkena moralized that the woman's death might have been prevented had she accepted her parents' choice of bridegroom.

Similarly, many of Bongay's oral narratives, including stories, were framed by sociocultural celebrations like masquerades, naming ceremonies, religious celebrations, and even funerals that occurred or were underway in his neighborhood and community in Mahera. As in Denkena's case, many of his stories performed during the *Bondo* and wedding festivals were often couched in the moral values of family life and fidelity (see also Bronner 1992, Ben-Amos 1984, Martin 1990). His performance of *The Shoe Maker and the Thebu*, for instance, was framed in variable ways, so much so that as children we could anticipate his characterization and thematic focus based on what was currently happening in our community. The "Shoe Maker," for example, as protagonist in the tale, could be anyone in the community who had been lucky in having a good fish catch or harvest, or could reflect a number of other current circumstances. We were able to make such connections because we have a shared knowledge of the narrative pathways of the stories.

Sociocultural events are therefore opportune backdrops that are tactfully exploited by the savvy oral artist for remolding and varying their art as well as providing a moral foreground for their narratives' message. I would suggest that the consistency of this pattern and its prevalence in Themneland might also be attributable to social aesthetic considerations. Both stories and sociocultural events are referents for—and linked together by—the aesthetic imperative of oral art performance as well as their interpretation and appreciation.¹⁵

The above examples serve to shed light on receptionalism in oral performance among the Themne from two perspectives. First, in spite of the performer's varying of characters, themes, songs, and even moral lessons, the audience-participants are able to participate in their interpretation and appreciation. This is made possible because performer and audience-participants share the same hermeneutic norms of Themne performance tradition (see also Dubois 1996). For example, through a process of "attribution" the audience-participants were able to identify the characters within their community who were implicated in the stories as well as interpret and understand the messages or moral lessons being conveyed. Second, it shows that oral performances such as storytelling do not take place in an aesthetic vacuum, but in the context of shared traditional expectations inherent in the performance community (see Foley 1986:215, Dubois 1996).

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that the social aesthetic potential for storytelling can be more resourcefully harnessed in the context of prevailing sociocultural activities as well as climatological and vocational expediencies within the community. Its

¹⁵ For similar observations, see Briggs 1988, Bauman and Briggs 1990.

socializing function provides the impulse for the oral artist and the audience-participants to deploy their linguistic and extralinguistic resources, often embedded in multimedia, in reworking and elaborating their storytelling material. As has been observed in the Irish and Scottish Gaelic cultures, social institutions have largely contributed to the preservation of oral traditions like storytelling in Africa.¹⁶ However, the extent to which considerations for social values and the sociability factor contribute to aesthetics may also be contingent upon the Themne worldview and belief systems, as indeed in any other culture. The next section will explore this relationship and its ramifications for Themne artistic creativity and receptionism.

The Social Aesthetics of Themne Belief Systems

Storytelling, like other folkloric art forms, is an embodiment of the way people see the world and the belief patterns of the culture in which they exist. The pedagogical value of this medium for transferring knowledge across generations has been exhaustively discussed in the literature (e.g., Degh 1995, Avorgbedor 1990, Agovi 1995, Ben-Amos 1984). However, little has been said about the way in which social aesthetics underpins the belief systems and worldview of certain cultures on the one hand, and on the other how it in turn influences artistic variation and audiences' reception of oral performances.

We have seen that the tradition favors nighttime storytelling, and that it is considered unsociable to perform stories in poor light. Most of the audience participants who were interviewed after a story had been abandoned believed that stories in these conditions might be couched in grotesque imagery, causing children to have nightmarish dreams and thereby subverting the social and entertainment benefits to be derived.¹⁷ The aesthetic beauty of the storytelling environment and its convivial atmosphere, among other factors, are generally believed to induce children to sleep through the night. It is the norm, therefore, for parents and other adults to marshal children out into the brilliant moonlight on courtyards and verandas to tell or practice stories and other folklore genres.

In some situations, parents and other storytellers were prevailed upon to tell a story to assuage children's distress emanating from an abrupt end to a performance due to a "dark moon." Where this happened, the storyteller switched from "dark" and gory narratives to light-hearted ones devoid of scary content. In most cases, harmless comical stories like *Bra Spider* or other animal stories popular with children were narrated as alternatives. Bongay, for instance, would often opt to perform less dramatic folklore genres like riddles, proverbs, and anecdotes as a substitute for the more elaborate storytelling performances that demanded detailed extralinguistic resources for their realization. I would argue that the choice of storytelling material by Bongay and other Themne storytellers responded to the demands imposed by social aesthetic considerations for storytelling performances, an observation Linda Dégh (1995) also considers to be a motivational dynamic for artistic creativity in many storytelling cultures. As

¹⁶ See Delargy 1945 on the contributions of the Gaelic *céilidhe* or *áirnean* toward preserving oral traditions in post-war Ireland.

¹⁷ See Bruford 1994 for similar observations on traditions in Victorian Scotland.

has been observed, such a consideration influenced the choice of stories, the thematic content or subject matter, and the method and time of delivery. As the Themne storytellers perform, they are compelled by the social aesthetic imperative to reshape and rework their stories.

Among the Themne the value accorded to the social aesthetics of the performance may help explain why in some parts of Themneland telling stories during the day is taboo.¹⁸ The belief is particularly common in the rural areas where superstition is widespread. It is believed that daytime storytelling portends the death of a family or community member, so adult family members discourage children from telling stories during the day. However, after carrying out interviews with storytellers and their audiences, I believe that social aesthetics may be a subterranean factor underlying this seemingly superstitious belief. Some adults, including parents, hold the view that it is idle and unsociable for children to indulge in daylight storytelling.¹⁹ Those who hold this view also agree that storytelling should therefore be relegated to bedtime, or to hours during the evening. Inherent in this view is the perception that storytelling is an opportunity to while away the time, socialize, and prepare the children for bed.

Nonetheless, there is inconsistency in this belief even among those who hold it across Themneland. It was evident that during the rainy season, when inclement weather made it difficult to have moonlight and wood fires, stories were told during the day. This was an expedient option, especially for children. The inconsistency lends itself to two conclusions: that practicalities can override Themne beliefs, and that social aesthetics and the socializing function of storytelling may also play a critical role in the sanction against daylight storytelling for the community. I would extrapolate from this situation another ramification for an oral performance receptionalist theory: just as the artists vary aspects of their performance as an index of artistic creativity, so may their appreciation and interpretation vary across time and generations. The performance becomes an enactment of cultural values and artistic norms inherent in the performance community. Both social aesthetics and artistic variation are contingent upon the Themne belief system. The latter facilitates the way audience-participants respond to and receive oral performances. Contrary to some scholarly thinking, then, belief systems, social aesthetics, artistic variation, and receptionalism are all mutually inclusive (Foley 1986:215).

What I have illustrated to this point is that the demands of sociability, social values, and cultural beliefs of the Themne provide a subtext for aesthetic appreciation. They also provide the motivational dynamic for the Themne oral performers' artistic variation and creativity. I will now examine how socializing and entertainment motives as well as the aesthetic value system for storytelling are overtly manifested in the physical setting of oral performances across Themneland. This phenomenon illustrates the way in which the aesthetic setting provides opportunities to Themne storytellers and their audience-participants to improvise in their art and infuse originality into their performances.

¹⁸ For Irish Gaelic parallels, see Delargy 1945.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the socializing function of storytelling among children, see Bronner 1992.

The Aesthetics of Setting, Drama, and Contextualization

The aesthetic setting of Themne storytelling around a fire or under moonlight keys the contextualization, along with the dramatic and artistic resources for the performance as a creative art. It is worth pointing out that the forms and artistic significance of contextualization in verbal arts such as storytelling have been amply discussed in the academic literature.²⁰ Ruth Finnegan (2005) has emphasized the role played by physical setting, timing, and pyrotechnics as critical to appreciation of performance.²¹ Patrick Muana's discussion of contextualization cues (1998a) sheds light on the imperative for scholars to use contextualization as an analytical tool in negotiating and interpreting discourse and to understand its significance in negotiating aesthetic principles and social relations in oral performances.

However, the focus here is to explore the way in which the storyteller is motivated by the social aesthetics of the performance setting and how this in turn impinges on the storyteller's ability to improvise and contextualize the performance. The emphasis is therefore not on the interpretation or appreciation of oral performances by scholars, but rather on how the performer enacts a story by exploiting and deploying multimedia elements of the socially aesthetic physical setting of the performance. This dimension is significant because the manner in which the social aesthetics of the performance setting affects contextualization has yet to be thoroughly researched; the ability of the Themne oral artist to exploit the aesthetic resources of his performance setting will give weight to calls for scholars to pay due attention to the uniqueness of each performance and to capture, transcribe, and translate the externalities of a given performance as deployed by the oral artist.²² This focus, I will argue, will enhance the ability of researchers to adequately contextualize the performance, which in turn is crucial for its interpretation and appreciation, especially when rendered in textual form. I am suggesting that just as the performer contextualizes his performance, so should the scholar who is collecting and analyzing or appreciating that performance do likewise. The discussion that follows will briefly shed light on this phenomenon.

Fieldwork provides a wealth of observed instances where skilled Themne storytellers and audience-participants have exploited the aesthetic resources of the performance environment as stage props to aid the narrative development of their stories. For instance, the external multimedia resources of the storytelling setting—for example, the pyrotechnics and warmth provided by the glowing embers from the bonfire, the radiance of the vegetation lit by the moon and stars, the noises and chirping of birds, and the alfresco air—are some of the social aesthetic strands external to the verbal narrative and commonly available to the storyteller and audience-participants upon which to frame and contextualize stories (see also Finnegan 2005, Hunter and Oumarou 1998).

²⁰ See Kennedy 1992, Auer and di Luzio 1992, Bauman 1986, Bird and Kendall 1980, Muana 1998b.

²¹ I favor the term "pyrotechnics" over Finnegan's "lighting."

²² See further Muana 1998b, Barber 2005, Finnegan 2005, Schieffelin 2005, Hunter and Oumarou 1998.

Such framing and contextualization may take the form of similes, riddles, and proverbs that employ metaphors evoked by or associated with the aesthetic setting of the performance.²³ Many Themne storytellers and their audience-participants whom I observed used metaphors and similes drawn from the aesthetic social setting of the performance (as has been observed among the Ewe of Ghana by Avorgbedor 1990). Some examples include (Khan 1991-96):

a) The bride was as beautiful as that shining moon.

b) The king or paramount chief or warrior or lion
was as ferocious as these burning embers.

and

c) The owl or other nocturnal bird was silently
watching in the thick of night unnoticed.

d) The eyes of the black mamba snake were winking; *wakhei, wakhei*.

Every time deictic markers (“the,” “these,” and “that”) were deployed in similes or for descriptive purposes in this way by storytellers or audience-participants, they were accompanied by paralinguistic devices (Khan 1998). For instance, example c) above, the portrayal of the owl’s preying instinct in regard to other birds, rodents, and reptiles was realized by many storytellers through a spontaneous momentary break of silence in their narration, vividly conveying the stealth upon which the owl’s success in tracking and capturing its prey depends. The onomatopoeic sound *wakhei, wakhei* in example d) when performed by Bongay was rendered in synchronicity with the spluttering embers of the storytelling bonfire.²⁴ He also used dramatic eye movements to accompany the expressive utterance “*wakhei, wakhei*” in order to capture the snake’s ferocious intent.

The use of similar multimedia paralinguistic devices in the dramatization of oral narratives by other skilled storytellers was commonplace. They included smiling to capture the moon’s brightness, whistling or growling to mimic nocturnal birds and animals, and miming and moving about to reflect the peace and calm of the night (see also Khan 1998, Tannen 1984). As contextualization cues they enhanced the mimetic dimension of the storytelling and social interaction of the performance. The socially aesthetic setting therefore demonstrates two key functions: to animate the performance’s sociability (see also Yankah 1995) and to provide multimedia resources to serve as what I would refer to as “variability-enhancers” of the storyteller’s creativity. These bring dynamism to the performance and indeed to its artistic creativity and aesthetic appreciation. They are the means by which storytelling and other oral performances have continued to engage diverse audiences and generations. Further, they lend

²³ See also Martin 1990; Nicolaisen 1984, 1990; Gailey 1989.

²⁴ See Hunter and Oumarou 1998 for a discussion of ideophones as dramatizers in oral performances.

support in the study of oral performances by focusing on the uniqueness of each performance as an experienced work of art (Foley 1986:205; 1995).

A similar observation of the role of sociocultural resources and the environment in the creative process in African art has been made by Mohammed Abusabib in his theory of the “latitude of artistic creativity” (1995). He argues that sociocultural factors like the physical environment provide a situation that is conducive to creativity and largely responsible for the artist’s aesthetic drive. Besides identifying the physical setting as an aesthetic motivation for performing, this theory can also explain the role played by cultural beliefs and worldview in the Themne storyteller’s artistry. The prominence accorded by the Themne to storytelling as a collective social aesthetic enterprise was evident in the bringing of firewood or dry grass, and other stage props like musical instruments, to performances. As a child, my younger siblings and I used to plead with senior members of the family to chop down wood for us to take to such events. This practice was, and to some extent still is, common across Themeneland.

The contribution to the artistry and aesthetic integrity of the performance by the man-made bonfire setting, as combined with the surrounding natural environment of moonlight and nocturnal wildlife activities, is similar to that made by stage props and lighting in theater performances. The socially aesthetic setting of storytelling therefore contributes pomp, pageantry, and color, which are key artistic tools for elaboration, improvisation, and dramatization during the performance. Consequently, such keys facilitate the performance as a socially collective art form, and underpin the Themne aesthetic appreciation of oral art and natural environment (see also Budd 1996, Kennedy 1992).

Conclusion

Throughout this discussion I have focused on social aesthetics because little attention has been paid to the manner in which it lies behind the reworking of old material and creation of the new, by storytellers and other oral artists, to enhance artistic variation and creativity in oral performances. What abounds in the literature is description of the oral artist’s use of verbal aesthetics or expressive media such as linguistic and extralinguistic resources and of the role of material aesthetics in influencing artistic variability.²⁵ I have therefore coined the term “social aesthetics” to describe and capture the relations and interaction between the storyteller or oral artist and his material, the physical setting of the performance, and the belief systems or worldview of the culture in which the performance is embedded.

My social aesthetic inquiry has focused not on an analysis of story texts *per se*, but on the physical setting and sociocultural conventions of Themne storytelling practices, where aspects of social aesthetics impinge on the artistic variation and creativity. The use of multimedia resources by oral artists during performances serves, among other purposes, as a mechanism for varying their performance and as a means of realizing the social aesthetic potential of the oral performance. Further forms of material aesthetics that influence artistic variation of themes,

²⁵ On linguistic and extralinguistic resources, see Fine 1984, Childs 1994 and 1998, Finnegan 2005; on material aesthetics, see Ferme 2001, Abusabib 1995, Avorgbedor 1990.

content, and style, as well as providing a mechanism for socialization and collective artistry in African oral art performances, have not been explored here (see further Abusabib 1995, Ferme 2001). In Themne oral art practice, an often-deployed form of material aesthetics is instrumental music. However, it is the socially aesthetic setting—a combination of the man-made bonfire, timing, and the surrounding natural environment of moonlight and nocturnal wildlife activities—that plays a dominant role in the storytellers' craftsmanship. The physical setting and nature also constitute the multimedia resources on which the storyteller routinely draws in order to provide the sonic-plus-acoustic, visual, and kinesic features of a socially aesthetic performance.

I have also shown that the social aesthetic externalities of setting, together with the subterranean factors of sociocultural beliefs and value systems, provide the oral artist with opportunities to inject variety into the creative process. I have argued that this is indicative of the fact that in Themne oral culture textual features are dynamic because they evoke and depend upon the audience-participants' ability to respond to various interpretations of oral performances (see Foley 1986, 1991, 1995). As Foley has argued, this evolving reciprocity is largely responsible for oral performances' continued ability to engage diverse audiences across centuries (1986:205-6). I would therefore postulate that appreciation and interpretation may vary across time and generations, thereby making oral performances more attractive to their audiences.

The multiple resources at the disposal of the performer largely account for the dynamic nature of African oral art practice, as the storyteller tries to innovate in order to attract audiences as well as to appeal to their aesthetic tastes. The overarching relationship between social aesthetics and artistic variation, and its influence on the African oral artist's craftsmanship, may add to calls in the academy for oral performances to be accorded an appreciation equal to that routinely accorded to written texts or literatures. It should also re-prioritize the appreciation and analysis of oral performances from a text-based approach to a focus on the uniqueness of each performance as an experienced work (Foley 1991). In doing so, I will suggest, as others have, that scholars should take into account audience-participants' interpretations of such performances (Dubois 1996:236), since, as we have seen, the performance is an enactment of the artistic and sociocultural values inherent in a given performance community. Furthermore, the audience-participants play an active and dynamic role in the delivery, appreciation, and interpretation of a given performance, all of which may vary across performance culture, space, and time. In an era when there are other modern competing forms of entertainment and socialization media, Themne oral artists continue to exploit these artistic and aesthetic resources, thereby sustaining the interest, participation, and support of their audiences.²⁶

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²⁶ This article is dedicated to the memory of Kamanda Bongay, alias *boy-boy*, who was not only an accomplished Themne storyteller but also a philosopher and teacher to many of us who were his audience as well as his students. Also, I am indebted to Dr. John Shaw of the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, for motivating and supporting me to produce this article and for his insightful comments in shaping it.

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