Stability and Change in the Performances of Ohafia Igbo Singers of Tales

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STABILITY AND CHANGE IN THE PERFORMANCES OF 
OHAFIA IGBO SINGERS OF TALES 
Chukwuma Azuonye

This paper¹ discusses an alternative to the interpretation by Ruth 
Finnegan (1977: 76-80) of the evidence provided by Gordon 
Innes (1973: 118) in his discussion of stability and change in the 
performance of the epic of Sunjata by Mandinka griots in Gambia. 
The discussion is based on seven variant versions of the Qhafia 
Igbo epic of Nnɛ Mgbafọ² as performed by four of the leading 
singers of tales in the Qhafia community today, namely Okonkwo 
Oke of Akaaŋu (Singer A), Kaału Igiegiri of Qkọn (Singer B), 
Egwu Kaalu of Asaga (Singer C) and Njọku Mmaaju of Uduma 
Awoke (Singer F).³ Three comparative charts of these versions of 
the epic will be found following this discussion.⁴ In Chart I, four 
versions of the epic, each of which is the work of a different sing-
er, are compared in terms of their thematic constituents; in Chart 
II, four versions performed by the same singer (Singer B) on dif-
ferent occasions (including one analyzed in Chart I) are also com-
pared in terms of their thematic constituents; finally, in Chart III, 
two complete texts are compared to reveal the degree of stability 
and change not only in their content but also in their language and 
structure.

The data contained in these charts are similar to those on which 
Innes bases his discussion of the performance of the Mandinka 
griots. After comparing variant versions of the Sunjata epic as per-
formed by two brothers (Banna and Dembo Kanute) as well as 
two versions performed by a veteran griot (Bamba Suso), Innes 
concludes (1973: 118; emphasis added),

The evidence from the Kanute brothers shows that in the 
course his professional career a griot's version of the Sunjata 
legend may undergo considerable change. The evidence from 
Bamba, on the other hand, shows that a griot's version may 
remain remarkably stable, both in content and language, over 
a period of time. Different interpretations of this evidence 
are no doubt possible, but, taken along with other evidence, 
it suggests to me a pattern of life in which a griot in his 
younger days travels extensively, listens to other griots and 
borrows extensively from them, repeatedly modifying his 
own version until eventually he arrives at a version which 
seems to him the most satisfying. With repetition, this ver-
sion will become more or less fixed, and even the words will 
tend to become fixed to some extent.
Although Innes concedes that "different interpretations of this evidence are no doubt possible" and that even the "more or less fixed," final, and "satisfying version" produced over the years through the processes of creative change "will of course vary from performance to performance, depending upon such factors as who happens to be present and in whose honour the performance is being given," Finnegans chooses to press the evidence into service in her argument that "there are some relatively long quasi-narrative forms where memorization and exact recollection are sometimes more important than creativity in performance" (1977: 79). It soon becomes patently clear in the course of her argument that her purpose is to set up a rival theory to the oral-formulaic theory of Parry (1930, 1932) and Lord (1968), for she hastens to conclude after a sketchy discussion of other African and some European and American examples that (1977:79)

It is . . . clear that a single model of the relation of composition to performance will not cover all cases—perhaps not even all cases of narrative poetry. To accept uncritically Lord's dictum that what is important in oral poetry is "the composition during performance" would blind us to the different ways in which the elements of composition, memorization and performance may be in play in, or before, the delivery of a specific poem.

Does the evidence provided by Innes point, as inferred by Finnegans in this and other comments in her book, to what she terms "the possibility of prior composition followed by memorization" and "exact recollection" in the performance of oral poetry other than lyric and other shorter forms? To put the question another way and with special reference to the material on hand, are the changes made in various versions of their epic compositions by the Mandinka griots and similar singers of tales elsewhere part of a prolonged process of creativity intended ultimately to produce a "more or less fixed" and "satisfying version" of the tale that is to be memorized and recollected in as word-perfect form as possible in subsequent performances?

In the early phase of my study of the oral epic songs of the Qhafia Igbo (1973–75), Innes's interpretation of the Mandinka evidence seemed to offer a logical explanation to what at that time I saw as a tendency towards verbal stability in the few variant versions of heroic tales that I had recorded in Qhafia between 1971 and 1972. Here, I am referring in particular to the two versions of
the epic of Nne Mgbaafọ (by Singer B) compared in Chart III. An examination of these two versions will show that they are in many ways similar to the two passages from the Sunjata epic compared by Innes (see Finnegan, 1977: 76–77). We can indeed say of these versions what Finnegan says of the passages compared by Innes: that they exhibit “close similarity, in places amounting to word-for-word repetition” (1977: 76). In spite of the changes in Version B2 and even one or two cases of outright contradiction (e.g. the setting of the battle at Nnong Ibibie in line 6, rather than at Igbe Mmaku as in lines 4-5 of Version B1), the frequency of exact or nearly exact reproduction of the same lines (or at any rate word groups) in these texts is comparable to that in Bamba Suso’s versions of the Sunjata epic. If Innes’s interpretation of the Mandinka evidence is correct and as applicable to oral epic performances elsewhere as Finnegan infers, then one can envisage a time when, with selective borrowing from other singers coupled with repeated modification, the creator of the two early versions of the Nne Mgbaafọ epic will arrive at a version which will prove sufficiently satisfying to him for it to be committed to memory for exact or nearly exact recollection. There is in fact nothing of this kind in the performance of the Ohafia Igbo singers, although some of the testimonies in which they attempt to define the aesthetic basis of their performance might be understood at first to point to such a possibility. For instance, we are told, in a March 1976 interview, by Kaalu Izigiri of Okpọ (Singer B):

I don’t sing my songs at Okon in a form different from that in which I sing them at Asaga. The thing I sing at Okon is what I sing at Asaga. It is also what I sing at Ebem. . . . That is why Ohafia people all agree that I am the best of all their bards.

Similarly, a rival singer, Egwu Kaalu of Asaga (Singer C) declares (interview, July 1977):

Nothing extraneous is put into the songs [i.e. in different performances]. By that I mean that it is exactly what I sang in 1972 that I will sing today [1977].

Testimonies of this kind are not uncommon in field investigations of the aesthetic of the oral epic performance. Parry recorded similar testimonies from two Yugoslav singers—Sulejman Makić and Demo Zogić—in the course of his own field investigations (see
Lord, 1968: 26–28). When Parry asked Demo to compare a recent version of one of his own tales with a previous one, Demo replied that it was “The same song, word for word, and line for line. I didn’t add a single line, and I didn’t make a single mistake” (Lord 1968: 27). In a similar vein, Sulejman speaks as follows about a new version of a tale he has been asked to perform: “By Allah I would sing it just as I heard it. . . . It isn’t good to change or to add” (Lord, 1968: 26–27). In none of the texts recorded by Parry (see Parry and Lord, 1954 and Parry, Lord and Bynum, 1974), however, do we observe any form of word-for-word or line-for-line stability of the kind suggested by these testimonies. In fact the songs undergo minor as well as considerable change in performance after performance, and, as we can see from other testimonies, the singers are well aware of this and are also highly articulate about its creative implications (see Lord, 1968: 28–29).

The same is true of the performance of the Ohaifia Igbo singers. While the singers speak of the sameness of different versions of their compositions, they also—often in the same breath—boast of the changes that they are capable of making in their renditions of one tale or another in various performances. How can we resolve the apparent discrepancy here between the singers’ testimonies that their songs, in effect, remain unchanged in performance after performance and the fact known to the singers themselves that no two presentations of the same tale in the oral performance can ever be the same?

It seems fairly clear from the evidence contained in the seven versions of the epic of Nne Mgbaafọ compared in this paper (Charts I–III) that the composition and performance of the oral epic songs of the Ohaifia Igbo are governed by a traditional aesthetic that views creative change not as a means of producing fixed and stable versions of various tales for memorization and recollection in word-perfect form in subsequent performances but as a means of revitalizing and maintaining the legend that informs every tale in the repertoires of the singers. The stability the singers speak of in their testimonies is thus not textual stability (involving words, formulas, lines, and other structural elements); it is rather the stability of what I wish to call the heroic essence that each tale embodies.

In every performance, the heroic essence is conveyed by a unique selection and combination of an optimum range of formulas and themes from the traditional repertoire that best define the hero of the tale. Once this optimum selection of formulas and themes is present in any version of a tale, the audience will be
satisfied that there has been no deviation from the legend and that the tale they have heard that day is the same one they may have heard on several occasions in the past, regardless of who the singer may be, of any changes in language or structure in the current version, and of the presence or absence of various elaborative and incidental themes and motifs in the version. This, I think, is what happens in the seven versions of the Nne Mgbaafọ epic compared in this paper.

An examination of Charts I and II will show that certain themes are common to all seven versions of the epic and constitute the optimum selection of particularized themes needed to present the heroic essence of the legend of Nne Mgbaafọ. These themes identify the heroine by name (Theme 2), lineage (Theme 3) and marital affiliation (Theme 5); they set the scene of the war to which the heroine goes to search for her lost husband (Theme 13); they allude to or describe the departure of the heroine’s husband (Theme 16) and his tragic death, capture, or loss in the war (Theme 19); they evoke a picture of the heroine’s lament and the passionate love that provokes it (Theme 21); they describe the arming of the heroine in the habits of a male warrior (Theme 24) and her fearless search among a heap of headless bodies of slain warriors for her husband (Theme 42); and, finally, they celebrate her triumphant homecoming (Theme 53). So long as this optimum selection of essential themes is present in any version of the epic of Nne Mgbaafọ, it is bound to register the same impression on the minds of the listeners, regardless of who the singer may be, the occasion of performance, and various linguistic-structural changes made by the singer in his telling of the tale. The final impression is the picture of an indomitable and remarkable woman, who, motivated by a passionate love for her husband defies death and goes to search for him in the enemy territory in which he has been lost in battle.

The stability of this heroic image remains in force in version after version of the epic in spite of some serious inconsistencies that subsist even within the inner core of essential themes of which it is compounded. In Version A1 (Chart I), for instance, the heroine’s hometown is given as Arochukwu (Theme 3) and the name of her husband is given as Uduma (Theme 5) as opposed to Asaga and Ndukwe Emea in all other versions. Similarly, Version A1 (Chart I) differs from all other versions in its account of the circumstances under which the heroine’s husband goes to war (Theme 15) and the fate that befalls him (Theme 19); it suggests that it is Nne Mgbaafọ herself that urges her husband to embark on the war and portrays Uduma as having been killed in it; but in
the other versions, Nne Mgbaafọ is represented as being initially opposed to her husband’s adventure, and, in the denouement, she is portrayed as meeting Ndukwe Emea alive—in versions B and F, captured and held prisoner and in Version C, hiding among a heap of headless bodies. There is even some discrepancy in Singer B’s location of the battle (Theme 13) in his earliest and later versions: in Version B1 the battle is located at a place called Igbe Mmaku, while in the later versions the location is Nnong Ibibie. It may, however, be observed here that the location of the battle at Igbe Mmaku (in Version B1) may well have been a performance error that the singer was able to correct in all the later versions in which the battle is consistently located at Nnong Ibibie. Be that as it may, it does not appear that the actual name of the place in which the battle is located is important so long as it is recognized by the audience to be in the territory of the Ibibio, the traditional enemy of the Qhafịa people (see Azuonye 1979: Chapter 1). Thus we find that the location varies in the other versions: Atatum in A, Isantume in C, and, as in B, Nnunng Ibibia in F. Significantly, when I drew the attention of Singer B to these inconsistencies, in the course of my field investigations, he simply retorted: “Q kwahu ife olu ọhụ” [literally, it is the same [one] thing]. Atatum, Isantume, and Nnong are all in Ibibio territory and that is what matters. The actual name of any particular place does not mitigate the enormity of the danger to which the heroine submits herself when she goes to search for her husband, and it is this self-sacrificing submission to danger that is the heroic essence of the Nne Mgbaafọ legend, the essence that remains unchanged in performance after performance.

Apart from this heroic essence, the stability of which the Qhafịa singers and local connoisseurs speak in their testimonies seems to refer to the inner stability of the constituent themes of the songs. Themes, as defined in Parry (1930, 1932) and Lord (1968) are the basic narrative elements that go into the making of the oral epic; they are essentially stylized pictures of heroic reality, including pictures of participants, their actions, and the situations and setting (time and place) in which these actions take place. Themes are created, developed, or modified in the oral performance by means of formulas—ready-made units of description including traditional epithets of various kinds and a whole range of other fixed or relatively fixed phrases. A theme may be created, developed or modified by means of a single formula or several, and it may be created, developed, or modified in single line of verse or in several. It is essentially a highly malleable image that is capable of almost limi-
less change in shape or size while remaining essentially unchanged in meaning and significance.

As will be seen in the charts, the thematic components of the epic of Nne Mgbaafọ in the seven versions compared range from those which are developed in one or two verses (e.g., Theme 2, the naming of the heroine) to others which are developed in as many as 129 lines (e.g. Theme 26, the description of the heroine’s journey to the enemy territory in Version F1). The themes are the same in all the variant versions in spite of the differences in the actual words and formulas that have gone into their making, including differences in style and dialect arising from individual artistic purposes, backgrounds, training, contacts and competence as well as other differences that may arise from such factors as the growth or decay in the singer’s cultural competence (his knowledge of the tradition), his absorption and assimilation of borrowings from other singers, failure of memory, or simply the natural errors of linguistic performance (see Azuonye, 1979: 298–334 and 1981a for a detailed discussion of these features of the art and performances of the singers).

Two factors, then, seem to account for the impression of sameness perceived by the hearers of different and variant versions of the same oral epic tale in Qhafia. First, for each tale there is a core heroic image, and its optimum representation is closely associated with a selection of essential and particularized themes that must be present in every version for it to be recognizable as that tale. Second, the thematic materials that form the core heroic image and its elaborations are stable and malleable entities that remain essentially unchanged in spite of changes in their structure or magnitude. There is no evidence either from a synchronic or diachronic examination of the development of the songs to suggest any tendency toward linguistic-structural fixity. In fact any such tendency, which would conduce memorization and recollection by rote, will necessarily contravene one of the cardinal principles of the Qhafia Igbo art of the oral epic song, namely the principle of creative variation (see Azuonye, 1979: 378–383 and 1981d).

The principle of creative variation in the aesthetic tradition of the Ohafia people demands, among other things, that singers make changes in various performances of their tales not only because change involves pleasing variations in image and structure, which are satisfying in themselves, but also—and more importantly—because change is the chief means of recreating, hence revitalizing and reinforcing, the heroic tradition that the tales embody, of refining the tales towards more acceptable and authentic versions,
and of achieving clarity. Through change, then, the singers are not only able to meet the aesthetic principle of creative variation but also three other cardinal principles in the aesthetic tradition of the epics: namely the principles of functionality, authenticity, and clarity (see Azuonye, 1979: Chapter 9; and 1981a and 1981d). Not surprisingly, therefore, many singers in their testimonies boast of their capacity to make changes in their performances and most speak of change in terms of growth and renewal. Here are some typical testimonies:

I. I make many changes when I sing my songs. I even make changes in the traditional choric songs [aby-ọkwụkwụ]. But more importantly, I can easily switch from the old heroic songs—the ones inherited from the ancients—to new songs (made by myself) about the events of today. I can sing newly created songs—those which nobody in Qhafia has ever heard before [Kaalụ Igarigiri of Qkọn, Singer B, interview, March 1976].

II. It is just like what we have in a church service. We are all the time changing. We change and say: This one is this, that one is that, that other one is that—just like a gramaphone record. Doesn’t a gramaphone record have a front and a back? Our songs are just like that [Kaalụ Ikpo of Qkọn, one of Singer B’s musicians, interview, March 1976].

III. Once he [Kaalụ Igarigiri] has finished singing about any particular hero, he will not mention that hero again in the same performance. Other tales will now be sung in a completely different voice [Ukaọha Agwunṣi of Qkọn, one of Singer B’s musicians, interview, March 1976].

IV. It is very much like farming. You clear a piece of land and plant seed yams on it. After this, you harvest the yams and plant seed yams on the land. Eventually (during the next planting season), you dig out the seed yams and leave the land fallow. You then go and clear another piece of land and plant seed yams there, followed by another harvest and the planting of seed yams, after which you leave the land fallow again. Our songs are just like that. They grow. They are plentiful. Performing the songs is just like going to school. After going through one page you turn to another, and so on. The same is true of the performance of the songs [Egwụ Kaalu of Asaga, Singer C, interview, March 1976].

Let us now examine briefly some of the ways in which creative
change helps the singers in their performances to meet the other traditional aesthetic principles of clarity, authenticity, and functionality. An examination of Chart II will show that whereas versions B1 and B2 of the Nne Mgbaafọ epic are extremely compressed narratives of 54 and 55 lines, versions B3 and B4 are relatively elaborate compositions running into 242 and 234 lines. The elaborative changes made by Singer B (Kaalu Igirigiri of Okon) in the two later versions may have been occasioned by criticism of his earlier compositions, such as the following by one of his rivals, Ogbaa Kaalu of Abia (Singer D) (interview, March 1976):

There are many things which we spell out clearly by name which Kaalu Igirigiri does not put into his songs. Thus, he fails to represent things as they really are. He cuts them up into small unrelated bits. But when we on our part sing, we explain to you quite clearly how everything happened, from the beginning to the end. . . . But he [Kaalu Igirigiri] cuts them up into small bits.

This criticism was played back on the tape recorder shortly before Version B3 was recorded and over a year before the recording of Version B4. In the same criticism, Ogbaa Kaalu of Abia identifies and comments on a number of details that he finds missing in Version B1, which my field assistant had earlier played back to him (interview, March 1976):

When he [Kaalu Igirigiri] sings, he does not seem to have the ability to sing in such a way that it will be quite clear to you—so that it will be quite clear to you from what he actually puts into the song—so that you will be able to see it quite clearly from the beginning to the end. When we, on our part, sing, we put in even the lament of that woman. . . . There is a way in which one can simulate that lament and tears will roll down from your eyes.

Ogbaa Kaalu's criticism of the performance of Singer B seems clearly from the above testimonies to be directed at what he considers to be the singer's repeated failure in various compositions to include certain vital themes needed to make the tales concerned appear coherent and complete and to register a deeper impact on the emotions of the audience. In versions B3 and B4 of the Nne Mgbaafọ epic, Kaalu Igirigiri seems to have attempted to include a number of such themes. The first is Theme 26 (the account of the
heroine's journey to the enemy territory in the course of which she meets a number of heroes who attempt to persuade her not to embark on her perilous journey). This theme appears in a very sketchy form in lines 13–25 of Version B1 (see charts II and III) and is completely omitted in Version B2 (see also charts II and III); in versions B3 and B4, on the other hand (see Chart II), it is treated much more elaborately (lines 57–93 and 60–93), though not in as much detail as in Version F1 (Chart I) in which the description of the journey is the focal interest of the narrative (lines 64–193). Other details that are not present in Singer B's early versions (B1 and B2) but are included in the later versions (B3 and B4) which describe, among other events, the heroine's stopover at Igbe Mmaku where she is hospitably received and given armed escorts to her destination.

These details not only give a more coherent and complete picture of the heroine's adventure than we get from the versions in which they are omitted, but they also satisfy the principle of authenticity in the traditional aesthetic. The principle of authenticity demands, among other things, truth (eziokwu) and reality (ife meee eme) in the narration of heroic events. The picture of the heroine escorted by four (or eight) armed men to her destination seems much more credible than the more sensational picture of her marching alone into the enemy Ibibio territory. This added realism does not run counter to the heroic essence of the Nne Mgbaafọ legend: It merely eliminates extreme sensationalism without obliterating the heroic image of Nne Mgbaafọ as a fearless woman who boldly confronts the inveterate Ibibio enemy demanding death or the restoration of her captured spouse.

Apart from realism and credibility in the presentation of the hero and his or her actions, another important requirement of the traditional Qhafja aesthetic principle of authenticity is that singers should demonstrate in their songs a wide knowledge of Qhafja lineages and their founding fathers as well as their appropriate praise names. This is what Kaalu Igregiri (Singer B), in the following testimony, terms ilu-aka (interview, March 1976):

This is what we call ilu-aka—knowledge of the ancestors: knowledge of the founding fathers of Akaanu, knowledge of the founding fathers of Uduma. . . . My rivals know nothing of these things.

Boasting of such knowledge, in a testimony in which he contrasts his compositions with those of singers in training (appren-
tices), Singer D (Ogbaa Kaalu of Abja) declares: "I have a tape-recording mechanism in my head. I have gone beyond the stage of apprenticeship." The performance of apprentices, he says, lacks authenticity because their knowledge of lineages, ancestors, and praise names is far too limited to serve them on all occasions of performance. Thus an informant says of Echeme Ugwu of Ebem (Singer E) (Ukaqha Agwans, one of Singer B’s musicians, interview, March 1976):

There is someone named Echeme who sings at Ebem. He only eulogizes his own kinsmen, since he knows nothing of heroes that have lived in all other lineages [of Qhafia]. He is still an apprentice.

By contrast, Singer B [Kaalu Igirigiri] is praised for possessing the ability to range over even the whole of Nigeria—to embrace the Qhafia community as a whole—in his enumeration of ancestors and lineages in his songs (Kaalu Ikpo, one of Singer B’s musicians, interview, March 1976):

When he sings, he will make sure that he calls this person, calls that person, calls that person and calls that other person. He does not stick to one person. He will go on calling until he has called them all.

It would appear then that the expansion of Theme 26 (the heroine's journey to the enemy territory) in various versions of the Nne Mgbaafọ epic, to include a long catalogue of places, lineages, ancestors, and praise names is in fulfillment of the demand of the aesthetic tradition for what Kaalu Igirigiri, in another testimony, terms "complete invocation" (Mkpquzu). In this respect, Singer F (Njoku Mmaju of Uduma Awoke) would appear, by his showing in the versions of the Nne Mgbaafọ epic available to us, to be a better artist than Singer B whose own versions are much more limited in the range of their eulogistic invocations. Singer F even goes further, in his version of the epic, to include a theme unique to him (Theme 52) in which he describes the heroine's return journey with an additional catalogue of localities, lineages, ancestors, and praise names.

Singer F's elaborate description of the heroine's journeys not only satisfies the traditional principle of authenticity by its breadth and completeness; it also satisfies another facet of the principle, which demands the singing of the heroic tales in such a way as to
enlighten the listeners about their past and traditions and to awaken their spirits to the ethical values of the heroic society. The recurrence of verses of the following kind throughout the description of the journey highlights the heroic values of self-sacrificing love (e.g., determination, fearlessness) (Nne Mgbaafọ F1: lines 76-83):

Then she came out to Nde Ibe Aja
Birthplace of numerous braves
Came to their village square and sat down.
They asked the young woman: Why are you carrying a gun
and a matchet, what is it that has put you in this desperate state?
She said her husband had gone to the Nnung Ibibie war;
He was called Ndukwe Emea, he had failed to return.
She said she was going to Nnung Ibibie: Let them kill me
as they have killed my husband
So that we shall be reborn together in the land of spirits
and get married all over again.
They were moved with pity and so they opened their gates to her.

The moral of the life of Nne Mgbaafọ is driven home through the introductory and closing remarks (themes 1 and 54, in Chart 1) addressed to the collector on the particular occasion of performance. Information is given on the nature of Qhafia heroic warfare in Theme 17.

Clearly, from the foregoing, change and variation are vital components of the art and performance of the Qhafia Igbo singers of tales, satisfying as it does the traditional aesthetic principles and helping to reinforce, renew, and extend the essence of the heroic tradition embodied in the tales.

Innes (1973: 118) thinks that with repeated change, the Mandinka griots that are discussed in his article tend to arrive at a satisfying version of the Sunjata legend that is "more or less fixed" and in which "even the words . . . tend to become fixed to some extent." He fails, however, to pursue the full implications of this speculation. Of what value is a "fixed" version of the Sunjata legend either to the griot who produces it or to the Mandinka culture to which it ultimately belongs? Why would any griot consider such a version "the most satisfying" of numerous versions created over the years in the course of his professional career? Is the satisfaction vouchsafed by this version a matter of personal
taste or does it reflect a traditional aesthetic shared in common by
the Mandinka people as a whole? In other words, is the version
satisfying because it is the best expression of something of cultural
value that is easily recognized and appreciated by the audiences to
which it is addressed? What is this? Is it tied to a particular selec-
tion and combination of words, to an ideal text? Are we then to
assume that there is such a thing as an ideal text—a unique com-
bination of words that is the best expression of something of great
cultural value?

There can be no doubt that, like their counterparts in Qhafi'a
and in other cultures in which oral heroic poetry flourishes, the
Mandinka audience does respond to the actual words of the Sun-
jata and other heroic narratives in their tradition of the oral epic
performance. Oral epic songs usually contain invocative passages
in the reciting or chanting modes—of the kind discussed briefly
above—in which affective heroic epithets are concentrated (see
Innes, 1974: 16-17, 1975: 21-25 and 1978: 10; and Azuonye,
1979: 156-166). These formulaic words and phrases are generally
densely packed with allusions to myth and history, to the personal
attributes of individual heroes and groups, and to significant pat-
terns of kinship and other vital relationships in the heroic society.
They thus evoke affective heroic images and pay homage to in-
dividuals and groups in the audience who may identify themselves
with the ancestors and illustrious kinsmen whose lives and careers
are so evoked. Together with other types of formulas and for-
mu-laic expressions in the narratives—notably the fixed verbal for-
matives on which the advancement of the narrative depends—epithet
formulas are the only fixed and stable verbal elements in the oral
epic. This, I think, is as demonstrably true of the performance of
the Mandinka griots as it is true of the performance of the Qhafi'a
Igbo and other oral epic singers. The idea of a common verbally
fixed version of any epic is, thus, as fallacious as it is useless in the
understanding of the dynamics and function of the oral epic per-
formance.

That there is no such thing as a common ("fixed" or "correct")
regional version of the Sunjata legend is in fact fully recognized by
Innes himself (1974: 30):

From the diversity of the versions of the Sunjata epic which I
recorded in The Gambia and from a comparison of these with
published versions from elsewhere, it seems clear that there is
no such thing as a Gambia version. The differences between
versions occur at the level of the individual griot, not region.
The versions are analogous in language study to idiolects, not dialects. The version which any particular griot gives depends largely on which other griots he has listened to on his travels and which parts of their narratives he has decided to make his own.

In a similar vein, a griot, Banna Kanute, says in the preamble to one of his versions of the Sunjata epic (in Innes, 1974: 145, lines 3-16):

The subject which I am going to talk about
Is the career of Mahkang Sunjata,
As I have heard it,
Because the Sunjata story
Is very strange and wonderful.
You see one griot,
And he gives you an account of it one way,
And you will find that that is the way he heard it;
You see another griot,
And he gives you an account of it another way,
And you will find that what he has heard has determined his version.
What I have myself heard,
What I have heard from my parents,
That is the account which I shall put before you.

So, then, the idea of a "fixed" version does not refer to a communal heritage. Nor does it refer to the repertoire of the individual griot. As Ba and Kesteloot (1968: 5) tell us:

If on the same day you were to make a narrator repeat the same account, you would hear a different version each time. In short, the griot is disinclined to tell the story two successive times in identical terms. He is first and foremost, a literary man; the variety of his language is token of his good taste as well as proof of his talent and his expertise.

Writing in the same vein, but with reference to the epic in Africa in general, Okpewho (1979: 25) asserts that "the aesthetic principle in the oral arts involves a slight tilt of the balance in favour of beauty over truth." He bases his argument on the observation that while
no artist is applauded for a brutal violation of the essential legacy, or what Albert Lord has called “the historical truth,” because of the fluidity of his medium and the unpredictable nature of his audiences, however, the dominant challenge of his art lies the peculiar stylistic twists and turns that he works on the original material.

On the same question, Lord himself says (1968: 29):

the picture that emerges is not really one of conflict between preserver of tradition and creative artist; it is rather one of the preservation of tradition by the constant recreation of it. The ideal is a true story well and truly told.

Where, then, does the hypothesis of the progressive distillation of a verbally fixed and stable version through the processes of repeated change over the years lead us? The hypothesis, as has been pointed out above, is not only meaningless but totally irrelevant to the understanding of what—from the point of view of the members of the societies to whom oral epic poetry is addressed—is the stable, culturally valuable element that remains unaffected in performance after performance by what Ba and Kesteloot have described as the singer’s variety of language. In spite of his hypothesis, Innes, in his introduction to his very valuable collection of three Mandinka versions of the Sunjata epic, comes very close to grasping this element (1974: 30):

Confronted by a number of different and often conflicting versions, the Western reader is likely to ask himself which one is “correct”, which is the “true” version. He may hope by diligent analysis of the versions to arrive at the truth. This is an attitude of mind that is quite alien to the Mandinka listener. For him, all versions are true, and, in his own terms, he is right. When pressed, informants would admit that they did not believe in the literal truth of, for example, the account of Sunjata’s uprooting a baobab tree. They interpreted this as just the griot’s way of saying that Sunjata was prodigiously strong. But such details are of no consequence; the story is true for the Mandinka at a deeper level than that of literal historical fact. The Sunjata epic is true in all its versions in that it is true to the facts of the moral and social life of the Mandinka. Whether the families said by Bamba to be descended from Tira Mahkang are in fact all descended from
him or indeed from a common source, is not really what matters. What does matter is that they feel a common bond, and the griot’s narration expresses this and is therefore “true” in the only way that matters for his listeners.

It is not quite clear whether this represents a revision of Innes’s earlier thesis (1973) regarding the tendency toward verbal fixity in the performances of the Mandinka griots. But the “truth” that he says here is the essence of the griots’ narrations seems indeed to be coterminous with what I have described above as the “heroic essence” of the Qhafi Igbo narratives, and this stable element is an abstraction that does not require a fixed text for its optimum expression.

Nevertheless, the processes of change in the performance of the Qhafi Igbo singers do indeed result in the creation of improved and more refined versions of various tales. The inner core of essential and particularized themes that best define the heroes are enlarged, reinforced, and modified by means of new formulas and images, and whole tales are elaborated by the addition of new themes. While the consequence is generally improved phraseology and structure, oral performance being what it is, the opposite might as well be the case in certain circumstances. This process of composition in the oral performance clearly fits more into the oral formulaic theory of Parry and Lord than into the model involving the memorization and word-for-word recollection of previously composed texts that Finnegan advocates on the basis of the evidence provided by Innes and other scholars. In fact, the evidence provided by Innes is largely misleading. It does not include versions of the Sunjata legend performed before or after the two versions compared in his article. Anyone who bases his interpretation of the nature of the art of the Qhafi Igbo singers on only the two versions compared in Chart III may be misled into reaching conclusions similar to those reached by Innes, albeit with the corroboration of other evidence. If Innes had considered earlier and later versions of the Sunjata legend by Bamba Suso, it is indeed very likely that he could have been able to see that the repeated words in the versions at hand (which he regards as evidence of a tendency towards a version in which “the words are more or less fixed”) are formulas and formulaic expressions of the kind that, in the Qhafi Igbo epics, embody the vital images whereby the singers create and recreate the inner core of themes giving stability to the heroic essence of each legend.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chart I</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Comparison of Four Versions of Nne Mgbaarq by Four Different Singers</em></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1. Introductory comment addressed to the collector**: 
   “When in the course of your life, you feel you ought to get married, fair-complexioned man/you are well-advised to get married to she-that-is-her-husband’s-heart, for she-that-is-her-husband’s heart is a great asset... We are here to tell the story of she-that-is-her-husband’s-heart” (1-6)*

| 2. Heroine’s name is Mgbaarq (1) | 2. Heroine’s name is Mgbaarq (1-2) | 2. Heroine’s name is Mgbaarq (8) | 2. Heroine’s name is Mgbaarq (7) |
Chart I (continued)


3. Mgbaafọ is a person of Arq-Oke-Igbo, i.e. Arq-chukwu (2-3)

3. Mgbaafọ is a person of Nde-Awa-Ezema-Elechi, i.e. Asaga Qhafja (3-4)

3. Mgbaafọ is a person of Nde-Awa-Ezema-Elechi i.e. Asaga, Qhafja (8-11)

4. She behaved very much like a man (4)

4. She behaved very much like a man (12)

5. Her husband’s name was Uduma (22-26)

5. Her husband’s name is Ndụkwe Emea (5)

5. Her husband’s name is Ndụkwe Emea (4-6)

5. Her husband’s name is Ndụkwe Emea (8)

6. Her first husband had died at Arqchukwu (5)

7. After mourning her first husband, she dresses up like a male warrior and sets out to look for a new husband (6-16)

8. After a long search, she is unable to find a suitable husband (17-21)

9. At last she comes to Nde-Ana-m-ele-m-ulu-Uma where she meets and marries a man named Uduma (22-27)

9. Ndụkwe Emea marries Nhe Mgbaafọ with money saved in his youth (7-8)

9. Her husband was her nurse when she was a baby girl (5)
Chart I (continued)


10. She is very much in love with her husband (6)

12. Uduma had not yet won a head in battle (28)

13. War breaks out at Atatum (29)
   13. Ndükwe Emea prepares to go to war at Nnong Ibibie (6)
   13. War breaks out at Asantume (9)

14. Ndükwe Emea now married to Mgbaafq (19)

15. Mgbaafq cooks a special meal for her husband and urges him to go to war (30–33)

15. Mgbaafq pleads with her husband not to go to war (7–8)

16. Uduma goes to the Atatum war (34)
   16. Ndükwe goes to the Nnong Ibibie war (9)
   16. Ndükwe goes to the Isantume war (10–15)

17. Explanatory statement addressed to the collector: the nature of Qhafja warfare in the heroic age and the difference be-
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<th>Chart I (continued)</th>
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18. Uduma is slain in the battle of Atatum (35–36)

18. Ndükwe spurns his wife's pleas, arms himself, and goes to the war, but he is captured and held hostage (9–12)

19. Nnung Ibibia people routed and several heads of their warriors brought home by the Qhafia head-gatherers (30–32)

21. When other warriors return, Mgbaafọ shaking with fear comes to inquire from them about her husband, but she is told to go back home for he had been slain (37–43)

21. After three weeks of waiting Mgbaafọ bewails the loss of her husband (13–15)

21. When all other warriors return and her husband fails to return, Mgbaafọ bewails his loss (16–27)

21. At dawn, Mgbaafọ sits by the wayside wailing for the loss of her husband, but every returning warrior she asks tells her that her husband was lost in battle (33–41)

22. Mgbaafọ recoils like a
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<tr>
<td>23. After searching in vain (within the neighborhood) for her husband, Mgbaafọ returns to her hearth (44-45)</td>
<td>25. She arms herself with a matchet and a gun and sets out for Amaachara (46-48)</td>
<td>25. She arms herself with a matchet and a gun and sets out to search for her husband (28-29)</td>
<td>25. She arms herself with a matchet and a gun and sets out to search for her husband (53-63)</td>
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<tr>
<td>26. On the way, various heroes question her about the purpose of</td>
<td>bat and would not eat, declaring that she would rather die so as to be married again to her husband—if he had been killed—in the land of spirits (41-52)</td>
<td>26. On the way, various heroes question her about the purpose of</td>
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Chart I (continued)


her mission and she declares she is going to search for her lost husband (30–44)

her mission and she declares she is going to search for her lost husband and if he had been killed to die with him so as to be married to him again in the land of spirits (64–193)

27. Mgbaafọ arrives at Amaachara (48)

27. Mgbaafọ arrives at Ikpe Ikoro Ngọn and is hospitably received by the people (194–215)

28. Song: ("Great leopards put put down your sword") linked to the heroine’s momentary rest at Ikoro Ngọn during which she "puts down her sword" (216–223)

29. Comment: audience
reminded that the tale of Ndükwe Emea is still on and that there is plenty of time still for the telling of it (226–229)

30. On their inquiry, Mgbaafo tells the people of Ikoro Ngون that she does not know the way beyond their land and requests safe conduct to Nnąng Ibibia (226–229)

32. After warning her of the risk of continuing on her quest, the people of Amaachara detail four men to escort Mgbaafo to the Atatum battleground (49–57)

32. After a meal, Ikoro Ngон people detail eight men and they escort Mgbaafo safely to Nnąłng Ibibia, with four men in front of her and four behind (229–239)
Chart I (continued)


33. With her Amaachara escorts, Mgbaafọ arrives at the Nnong Ibibie battleground (57)
33. Alone, Mgbaafọ arrives at the Nnong Ibibie battleground (23)
33. Alone, Mgbaafọ arrives at the Isantume battleground (15)
33. With her Ikoro Ngọn escorts, Mgbaafọ arrives at the Nnong Ibibia battleground (240–241)
34. Nnong Ibibia warriors stare at her in utter amazement (242–244)
35. Questioned by the Nnong Ibibie about her mission, Mgbaafọ challenges them to kill her too if they had killed her husband, for she has come to look for him (24–28)
35. They question the Ikoro Ngọn escorts about her mission and the Ikoro Ngọn give a full report (245–251)
39. She is asked to give the name of her husband and say if he came to the war (29–31)
40. The battleground is strewn with the corpses
Chart I (continued)

41. She is asked by the Nn̄ong Ibibie to go and search among a pile of headless bodies on the battleground (32–33)

41. Moved with pity, Nn̄ong Ibibie people ask Mgbaafọ to go and search among a pile of headless bodies on the battleground and pick her husband’s body if she could find it; but they caution her to leave all other “meat” untouched (252–261)

42. Mgbaafọ discovers the headless body of her slain husband in a pile of headless bodies (58–59)

42. After searching long among the headless bodies, Mgbaafọ cannot find any trace of her husband’s body (34–38)

42. Searching among the headless bodies, Mgbaafọ discovers her husband alive and hiding in the midst of them (47–53)

42. Mgbaafọ searches in vain for her husband in the pile of headless bodies (262–263)

43. The Nn̄ong Ibibie release Ndũkwe Emea from the prison in which

43. Nn̄ong Ibibia people moved with pity unlock their prison and
Chart I (continued)


he is held hostage (35–40)

44. Ndụkwe Emea is identified by Nne Mgbaafọ as her husband (4)
45. He is then informed that his wife has come to look for him (42)
46. On his request, he is cut loose from his cuffs and brought before his wife
46. Nnọng Ibibia people cut Ndụkwe Emea loose from his cuffs and treat his bruises with wine and shake his hand (272–276)

47. Mgbaafọ and Ndụkwe Emea are jubilant as they come face to face with each other (48–49)
47. Mgbaafọ and Ndụkwe Emea exchange passionate greetings as they come face to face with each other (54–60)
47. Mgbaafọ and Ndụkwe Emea are jubilant as they come face to face with each other (270–271)

48. Full of admiration for her courage, Nnọng Ibibia people agree to re-
48. Amazed by her courage and afraid of the consequences of keep-
<table>
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<th>Chart I (continued)</th>
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<td>store Ndụkwẹ Emea to Mgbaafọ (5-54)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

49. She buries the headless body and sacrifices a goat on the grave (60-64)

50. Mgbaafọ asks Ndụkwẹ Emea to show the head he had won in battle, but Ndụkwẹ Emea had won none (61-62)

51. Less than three weeks later, Mgbaafọ overpower and captures a man at Ụykpam and sacrifices him on her husband's grave (65-70)

51. On their way back home, Mgbaafọ overpowers, kills and chops off the head of a passerby and gives the head to Ndụkwẹ Emea to take home as his prize (63-75)

52. Mgbaafọ returns safely

52. On their way back
Chart I (continued)


home, they stop over at Ikoro Ngön and many other places and are received with fanfare and merriment (284–314)

53. From Ugwu-Qnyiri-Egbe, they at last return to a feast of heroes in their hometown of Nde-Awa-Ezema-Elechi (315–334)

54. Closing remark: “A good woman is a good thing” (71–73)

54. Song: Nwata nwaami ebufuru egbe chowa di ha! (A young woman carrying a gun is out searching for her husband!)

54. Closing remark addressed to the collector: “Fair-complexioned man/That is how a young woman brought her lost husband home from war/To the headgathering clan of Nde-Awa-Ezema-Elechi” (335–337)
Chart I (continued)

* Version A1 (by Okonkwo Oke of Akaanu) was recorded in the singer’s hometown by Chijioke Abagwe, in a prearranged and controlled performance before a small audience. Versions B2 (by Kaalu Idirigiri of Okon), C1 (by Egwu Kaalu of Asaga) and F1 (by Njoku Mmaju of Uduma Awoke) were recorded in similar contexts, B2 and C1 on the same evening at Asaga (Singer C’s hometown), F1 in the singer’s house in his hometown. As I have shown elsewhere (Azuonye 1981b) experiments conducted in the field revealed that it is highly advantageous to record in prearranged and controlled performances in which the noise of the musical accompaniment (horns, percussion and drums) and other background noises can be reduced to the barest minimum making the words of the singer clear and audible. Comparison of texts recorded in such performances and those recorded in traditional festivals, rituals, etc., did not reveal any distortions of the tradition nor any differences save stylistic-structural and thematic variations of the kind found to be germane to the art of the singers (see Azuonye 1979: chapters 8 and 9 and 1981a and d).

** The collector here addressed is the author of the present article.

CHART II

Comparison of Four Versions of Nne Mgbaafọ by the Same Singer, Kaalu Idirigiri of Okon*

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The heroine’s name is Mgbaafọ (1)</td>
<td>2. The heroine’s name is Mgbaafọ (1-2)</td>
<td>2. The heroine’s name is Mgbaafọ (1-2)</td>
<td>2. The heroine’s name is Mgbaafọ (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mgbaafọ is a person of Nde-Awa-Ezema-Elechi, i.e. Asaga, Qhafja (2)</td>
<td>3. Mgbaafọ is a person of Nde-Awa-Ezema-Elechi, i.e. Asaga, Qhafja (2-4)</td>
<td>3. Mgbaafọ is a person of Nde-Awa-Ezema-Elechi, i.e. Asaga, Qhafja (3-6)</td>
<td>3. Mgbaafọ is a person of Nde-Awa-Ezema-Elechi, i.e. Asaga, Qhafja (2-4) and of</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Her husband's name is Ndịkwe Emea (10-12)</td>
<td>5. Her husband's name is Ndịkwe Emea (5)</td>
<td>5. Her husband's name is Ndịkwe Emea (16)</td>
<td>5. Her husband's name is Ndịkwe Emea (5-7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. She is very much in love with her husband (7-9, 12-14)</td>
<td></td>
<td>10. She is very much in love with her husband (7-9, 12-14)</td>
<td>12. Her husband had already won a head in battle and had thus freed himself from the stigma and shame of cowardice (10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. She is the mother of four children (10-11)</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Her husband goes to war at Igbe Mmakụ (4-5)</td>
<td>13. Her husband goes to war at Nnọng Ibibie (6)</td>
<td>13. War breaks out at Nnọng Ibibie (15)</td>
<td>13. War breaks out at Nnọng Ibibie (11-12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Mgbaafọ pleads with her husband not to go to the war (7-8)</td>
<td>15. Mgbaafọ pleads with her husband not to go to the war (16-22)</td>
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<td>15. Mgbaafọ pleads with her husband not to go to the war (13-17, 19-25)</td>
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<td>18.</td>
<td>Ndụkwe Emea spurns her pleas, arms himself, and goes to the war, but he is captured and held hostage (9–12)</td>
<td>Ndụkwe Emea insists on going, arms himself, goes, and is captured and held hostage (23–30)</td>
<td>Ndụkwe Emea insists on going, arms himself, goes, and is captured and held hostage (18–19, 26–34)</td>
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<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Nnọng Ibibie people say they will sell Ndụkwe Emea into slavery and spend the proceeds on wine (31–39)</td>
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<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>When after three market weeks, Ndụkwe Emea fails to return, Mgbaafọ sets out to search for him (6–7)</td>
<td>After three market weeks, of waiting, Mgbaafọ bewails the loss of her husband (13–15)</td>
<td>When, after three market weeks, Ndụkwe Emea fails to return, Mgbaafọ in tears vows to go and search for him—to bring him home alive or die wherever he may be lying in death (41–50)</td>
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<tr>
<td>25. She arms herself with a matchet tied to her waist and a gun placed on her shoulder (51-56)</td>
<td>25. She arms herself with a matchet tied to her waist and a gun placed on her shoulder (51-56)</td>
<td>25. She arms herself with a matchet tied to her waist and a gun placed on her shoulder (56-59)</td>
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<tr>
<td>26. On the way, various heroes question her about her mission and she declares that she is going to look for her husband and that she is ready to die with him wherever he may be lying in death (13-25)</td>
<td>26. On the way, various heroes question her about her mission and she declares that she is going to look for her lost husband and that she is ready to die with him wherever he may be lying in death (57-93)</td>
<td>26. On the way, various heroes question her about her mission and she declares that she is going to look for her lost husband and that she is ready to die with him wherever he may be lying in death (60-93)</td>
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<tr>
<td>27. At dawn, she arrives at Igbe Mmakụ and sits waiting in their ogo with her gun pressed between her laps (94-96)</td>
<td>27. At dawn, she arrives at Igbe Mmakụ and sits waiting in their ogo with her gun pressed between her laps (94-99)</td>
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<td>31. Igbe Mmakụ people look after Nne Mgbaafọ till</td>
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<td>the next day, warning her all the while to go back home (107–114)</td>
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<td>32. Igbe Mmakụ people then detail four men to escort her safely to Nnọng Ibibie (115–122)</td>
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<td>33. Alone, Mgbaafọ arrives at the Igbe Mmakụ battleground (26)</td>
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<tr>
<td>33. Alone, Mgbaafọ arrives at the Nnọng Ibibie battleground (23)</td>
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<tr>
<td>33. On arriving with her Igbe Mmakụ escorts at Nnọng Ibibie, Mgbaafọ sits alone in their ogo with her gun pressed between her laps (123–125)</td>
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<td>35. Questioned by the Nnọng Ibibie about her mission, Mgbaafọ challenges them to kill her too if they have killed her husband, for she has come to look for him (24–28)</td>
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<tr>
<td>35. Nnọng Ibibie people question the Igbe Mmakụ escorts about her mission and they give a brief report of it (126–138)</td>
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<tr>
<td>35. Nnọng Ibibie people question the Igbe Mmakụ escorts about her mission and they give a brief report of it (121–131)</td>
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<td>Chart II (continued)</td>
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<td>36. The Igbe Mmakụ escorts are requested by the Nnọng Ibibie to disarm Nne Mgbaafọ (139-141)</td>
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<td>37. The Igbe Mmakụ escorts disarm Nne Mgbaafọ and surrender her weapons to the Nnọng Ibibie (142-153)</td>
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<td>38. Mgbaafọ is then bound hands and feet by the Nnọng Ibibie (145-147)</td>
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<td>39. She is asked to identify herself and her husband by name (27-30)</td>
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<td>39. She is asked to identify her husband by name and say if he had come to the war (29-31)</td>
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<td>39. She is questioned about her mission and asked to identify herself and her husband by name, whereupon she boldly challenges the enemy to kill her too if they had killed her husband so she would be</td>
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<td>killed her husband</td>
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<td>reborn with him and</td>
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<td>become married again</td>
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<td>in the land of spirits</td>
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<td>(148–153)</td>
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<td>41. She is told by the</td>
<td>41. She is told by the</td>
<td>41. She is told by the</td>
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<td>enemy to go and search</td>
<td>enemy to go and search</td>
<td>enemy to go and search</td>
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<td>among a pile of headless</td>
<td>among a pile of headless</td>
<td>among a pile of headless</td>
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<td>bodies of slain warriors</td>
<td>bodies of slain warriors</td>
<td>bodies of slain warriors</td>
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<tr>
<td>(32–33)</td>
<td>(164–167)</td>
<td>(154–157)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>42. After searching long</td>
<td>42. After searching long</td>
<td>42. After searching long</td>
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<td>among the headless</td>
<td>among the headless</td>
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<tr>
<td>bodies, Mgbaafọ cannot</td>
<td>bodies, Mgbaafọ cannot</td>
<td>bodies, Mgbaafọ cannot</td>
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<tr>
<td>find any trace of her</td>
<td>find any trace of her</td>
<td>find any trace of her</td>
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<tr>
<td>husband (34–38)</td>
<td>husband (168–184)</td>
<td>husband (158–172)</td>
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<tr>
<td>43. The Nnọng Ibibie</td>
<td>43. The Nnọng Ibibie</td>
<td>43. The Nnọng Ibibie</td>
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<tr>
<td>release Ndykwe Emea</td>
<td>release Ndykwe Emea</td>
<td>release Ndykwe Emea</td>
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<td>from the prison in</td>
<td>from the prison in</td>
<td>from the prison in</td>
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<td>which he is held</td>
<td>which he is held</td>
<td>which he is held</td>
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<tr>
<td>(31–33)</td>
<td>(39–40)</td>
<td>(185–203)</td>
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<tr>
<td>43. The Nnọng Ibibie</td>
<td>43. The Nnọng Ibibie</td>
<td>43. The Nnọng Ibibie</td>
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<td>send two men to</td>
<td>send two men to</td>
<td>send two men to</td>
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<tr>
<td>fetch Ndykwe Emea</td>
<td>fetch Ndykwe Emea</td>
<td>fetch Ndykwe Emea</td>
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<td>from the prison in</td>
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<td>which he is held</td>
<td>which he is held</td>
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<td>Chart II (continued)</td>
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<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>He is asked to identify himself and his wife by name (34-39)</td>
<td><strong>44.</strong> He is identified by name by Mgbaafọ (41)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td><strong>Ndụkwe</strong> is then informed that his wife has come to look for him (40).</td>
<td><strong>45.</strong> Ndụkwe is then informed that his wife has come to look for him (42)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>45.</strong> The Nnọng Ibibie then surprise Ndụkwe by naming his wife and hometown and revealing the fact that his wife had come to look for him (185-204)</td>
<td><strong>45.</strong> The Nnọng Ibibie then surprise Ndụkwe by naming his wife and hometown and revealing the fact that his wife had come to look for him (188-194)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>On his request, Ndụkwe is cut loose from his cuffs and brought before his wife (43-47)</td>
<td><strong>46.</strong> On his request, Ndụkwe is cut loose from his cuffs and brought before his wife (205-212)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>Mgbaafọ and Ndụkwe are jubilant as they come face to face with each other (48-49)</td>
<td><strong>47.</strong> Mgbaafọ and Ndụkwe Emea exchange passionate greetings as they come face to face with each other (213-228)</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>47.</strong> Mgbaafọ and Ndụkwe Emea exchange passionate greetings as they come face to face with each other (206-214)</td>
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</table>
Chart II (continued)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>48. Full of admiration for her courage, The Nnọng Ibibie agree not to harm Mgbaafọ and to restore her husband to her (41-48)</td>
<td>48. Full of admiration for her courage, the Nnọng Ibibie agree to restore her husband to her (50-54)</td>
<td>48. Full of admiration for her courage and fearful of the consequences of keeping the husband of such a valiant woman, the Nnọng Ibibie restore her husband to Mgbaafọ (229-236)</td>
<td>48. Full of admiration for her courage and fearful of the consequences of keeping the husband of such a valiant woman, the Nnọng Ibibie restore her husband to Mgbaafọ (215-221)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53. Mgbaafọ returns safely home with her husband (49)</td>
<td>53. Mgbaafọ returns safely home with her husband (55)</td>
<td>53. The Nnọng Ibibie restore her weapons to Mgbaafọ and she returns safely home with her husband (237-242)</td>
<td>53. The Nnọng Ibibie restore her weapons and she returns safely home with her husband (222-227)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54. Closing song: Nwata nwaamị achọwa di ya (A young woman is searching for her husband)</td>
<td></td>
<td>54. Closing eulogy: Praises of the heroine's hometown (Asaga) (228-234)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Versions B1, B2, and B4 were all recorded at Asaga while Version B3 was recorded in the singer's house, in his hometown, Ikon.
Nne Mgbaafọ B1 (1971)

1. Mgbaafọ!
   Mgbaafọ!
2. Onye Nde-Awa-Ezema-
   Elechi.
   Person of Nde-Awa-Ezema-
   Elechi.
3. Di ya gaa aha.
   Her husband went to war.
4. O gaa aha Igbe Mmakụ.
   He went to the war of Igbe
   Mmakụ.
5. Di ya agaala aha Igbe
   Mmakụ.
   So then, her husband went
   to the war of Igbe Mmakụ.
6. Ya turu aha Nnọng Ibibie
   He went to the war of
   Nnọng Ibibie.
7. Ya sị di ya ọ gbee eje, ịgị
   anighị anụ okwu Ibibie e!
   But she said to her husband,
   “Please do not go, you
   know you do not under-
   stand the Ibibie tongue!”
8. Nde Ibibie egbu ịgị egbu!
   Ibibie people will surely kill
   you!
9. Di ya ruhaa ụka gaa aha
   Nnọng Ibibie.
   Her husband spurned her

Nne Mgbaafọ B2 (1972)

1. Nwata nwaamụ!
   Young woman!
2. Onye Nde-Awa-Ezema-
   Elechi.
   Person of Nde-Awa-Ezema-
   Elechi.
3. Q za Mgbaafọ Kaalu.
   Mgbaafọ Kaalu was her
   name.
4. Q wụ onye Eleghe Qfọka.
   She was a person of Eleghe
   Qfọka.
5. Di ya aza Ndụkwe Emea.
   Ndụkwe Emea was her hus-
   band’s name.

CHART III
Comparison of Two Texts of Nne Mgbaafọ by Kaalu Igirigiri of Oqon
Nne Mgbaafọ B1 (1971)

6. Ya ruo izu atọ, di ya lọ́ọ́-aluoghị... 
Three market weeks passed, her husband returned—did not return.

7. Di ya aluoghị 
Her husband did not return.

And so Mgbaafọ set out in search of her husband, and she sought her husband and ventured out to the war of Nnọ́ng Ibibie;

Nne Mgbaafọ B2 (1972)

10. Nde Ibibie daa di ya kea! Ibibie people caught and tied him up!


12. Wọ́ tükputọ ya ọkpọghọọ. And they locked him in with iron keys.

13. Mgbaafọ Kaalụ lea di ya izu atọ. For three market weeks, Mgbaafọ Kaalụ looked out for her husband.

14. Q fughị di ya. She did not see her husband.

15. Ya kwapụ. She burst into tears.

16. Ya lea egbe di ya turu. She took her husband’s gun and slung it on.

17. Ya daa mma di ya maa ọmụ turu ukwu. She took her husband’s matchet and belted it with ọmu (yellow palm leaves) to her waist.
9. Mgbaafọ chọọdiya gajepua
aha Igbe Mmakụ.
And so Mgbaafọ sought her
husband and ventured out
to the war of Nnọng Ibibie.

Ndykwe Emea is her
husband’s name.

11. Q za Ndykwe Emea ma di ya
That husband of hers,
Ndykwe Emea is his name.

12. Ya jere mbelege mbelege
jeruo ( . . . )
She walked mbelege mbelege
until she arrived at ( . . . )

13. Wọị Mgbaafọ gọ ọ bụre?
They questioned Mgbaafọ,
‘Where are you going?’

14. Ya ọma choje di ya:
She said she was going to
search for her husband:

15. Di ya wụ ezi di:
Her husband was a good
husband:

16. Q wụ ezi di ya ụnwa.
It was a good husband she
was married to.

17. Ma ya afughị di ya, ya arhadi
ibe di ya rhadii.
If she did not see her hus-
band, she would rather sleep
wherever her husband may
have slept.

18. Ya ọma choje di ya Nnọng
Ibibie
She said she would go
search for her husband at
Nnọng Ibibie:

19. Ma ya afughị di ya yaanagh
alụ a alụ.
If she did not see her hus-
band, she would never more
return.

20. A maghị di ya-alụzi ya alụzi:
No other husband could
marry her so caringly!

21. Q ụnwa alụ umunne ya!
He cared for her and cared
for all her relatives!
18. Ya ga-aga ogo muku.
   She went past their ogo.
19. Ya jewe mbelege mbelege
    bjaro Atan.
   She went mbelege mbelege,
    came and reached Atan.
20. Wọ jụ Mgbaafọ gụ ọ lụọ ole?
    They asked Mgbaafọ, “Where
    are you going?”
21. Ya sị ya choje ezhi di ya,
    Ndụkwé
    She said she was going to
    search for her good husband,
    Ndụkwé.
22. Q gaa aga Igbe Mmakụ, Q
    lụọghị.
    He went to the war of Igbe
    Mmakụ he has not returned
23. Qọ ya fụ di ya, ya alụọpuo;
    Only if she found her hus-
    band would she ever return;
24. Ma ya afughụ di ya, ya ar-
    hadi,
    If she did not find her hus-
    band, she would sleep,
25. O mee nde gbuu di ya, muku
    egbuo ya.
    And let those that killed her
    husband kill her too.
26. Ya jewe mbelege mbelege je
    aha Igbe Mmakụ, ruta rue.
    She went mbelege mbelege,
    went to the war of Igbe
    Mmakụ, came and reached.

22. Mgbaafọ Kaalu turu Nnong
    Ibibie.
    Mgbaafọ Kaalu set out for
    Nnong Ibibie.
23. Ya jewe mbelege mbelege
    jeruo aha Nnong Ibibie e!
    She went mbelege mbelege,
    went and reached the war
    of Nnong Ibibie!
24. Nde Nnong Ibibie, nde-
    ugboromnta, wọ gbafụ ya:
    Our good friends, the
    Nnong Ibibie people, quick-
    ly sighted her:
25. “Nwata nwaami, i mee agi
    buru egbe turu mma,
Nne Mgbaafọ B1 (1971)

27. Igbe Mmakụ wọ jụ ya, “Gọ aza nị?”
   Igbe Mmakụ people, they questioned her, “What is your name?”

28. Ya sị ya aza Mgbaafọ.
   She said that Mgbaafọ was her name.

29. Di ya aza nị?
   “[And] What is your husband’s name?”

30. Ya sị q za Ndụkwe Emea.
   She said that Ndụkwe Emea was his name.

Nne Mgbaafọ B2 (1972)

“Young woman, how dare you carry a gun and wear a matchet?”

26. Gọ ọbịa nị ogo wọ?”
   What have you come to do in our ogo?”

27. Ya sị, “Ọ wuru unu egbule di ya,
   She said “If you have killed my husband,

28. E gbuo ya-gi, ya chọsa di ya!”
   Kill me too, I have come to search for my husband!”

29. Nde Nnọng Ibibie jụ ya di ya a za nị?
   Nnọng Ibibie people asked her, “What is your husband’s name?”

30. Ya sị q za Ndụkwe Emea.
   She said that Ndụkwe Emea was his name.

31. Wo sị q, Q bịa aha Nnọng?,
   Ya kwere.
   They questioned her, “Did he come to the Nnọng war?”; she agreed.

32. “Go oleleri mkpughuru wọ gbuu egbu:
   “Go then and search among the headless bodies of those we have killed!”
31. Ibe ọrụ wọ dokwe Ndịkwe Emea,  
That place where they put away Ndịkwe,  

32. ( . . . ) ibe ori wọ zokwe Ndịkwe Emea,  
( . . . ) that place where they hid away Ndịkwe Emea,  

33. Wọ je kutu Ndịkwe.  
They went and called Ndịkwe.  

34. “Gọ ọlọọ onye?  
“Who are you married to?  

33. Go oleleri mkpughuru wọ gbuu egbu.”  
Go then and search among the headless bodies of those we have killed!”  

34. Nke ọ bja wụ mkpughuru ọhụ ya akwaghịa,  
She went and turned each of those headless bodies,  

35. Nke ọ bja wụ mkpughuru ọhụ ya akwaghịa,  
She went and turned each of those headless bodies,  

36. Ya sị di ya ańọọ ụma onye olu wọ.  
She said that her husband was not there at all.  

37. “Unu amaghịa ya hụwara di ya ama:  
“Do you not know my husband bears a mark by which I can pick him out:  

38. Mpa bu ya la apata!”  
There is a scar on his thigh!”  

39. Wọ gaa je lea nde ọrụ wọ dowee ulue.  
They went and searched among those men whom they locked away in a house.  

40. Wọ lọkọ Ndịkwe Emea.  
They called out to Ndịkwe Emea.  

41. Ndịkwe Emea ya aza.  
Ndịkwe Emea, he answered.
Nne Mgbaafọ B1 (1971)

35. Gọ ọluọ onye?
   Who are you married to?
36. Minye gọ aza nị?"
   What is the name of your
   wife?
37. Ya sị, "Q za Mgbaafọ!"
   He said, "Mgbaafọ is her
   name!"
38. "Gọ aza gini?"
   "And you, what is your
   name?"
39. Ya sị ya aza Ndụkwe.
   He said that Ndụkwe was
   his name.

40. "Minye gọ achorọla gọ bia:
   "Your wife has come in
   search of you:
41. Gọ bia je fụ minye go!"
   Come out and go meet your
   wife!

Nne Mgbaafọ B2 (1972)

42. "Minye gọ aghịala ogo unụọ
   chọrọ gọ bia!"
   "Your wife has come all the
   way from your ogo in
   search of you!"
43. Ya sị, "Unụọ ji agbụ kea ya
   ọkpa,
   He said, "You have tied my
   feet with ropes,
44. Ma atopụrụụ ya agbụ
   ọnwụ ya eje fụ sị ọọ minye
   ya!
   If only you will undo these
   ropes, I will come and see if
   she is indeed my wife!
45. Atopụ ya agbụ ya jee fụ sị
   ọọ minye ya!"
   Undo these ropes, let me go
   and see if she is indeed my
   wife!"
46. Wọ daa ya agbụ toa.
   They unbound him from
   the ropes.
47. Wọ kuru ya pụsa ife ogo.
   They brought him out to
   the light of the ogo.
Nne Mgbaafọ B1 (1971)

42. Nde ọhụ, nde-ugbom-nta—
Those people, our good friends—
43. Igbe Mmakụ sị e gbule nwaamị ọhụ:
Igbe Mmakụ agreed that that woman should not be killed:
44. (...)
(...)
45. “Q zịjari ogo mọọ chọọ di ya bja,
“She has come all the way from their ogo in search of her husband.
46. Q zịjari ogo mọọ chọọ di ya bja.
She has come all the way from their ogo in search of her husband,
47. E gbee ye egbu!”
Let her not be killed!”
48. Wọ kuru di ya we njikwa Mgbaafọ.
They took her husband and gave him to Mgbaafọ.

Nne Mgbaafọ B2 (1972)

48. Ya fụ Mgbaafọ, di ya fụ ya.
He saw Mgbaafọ, her husband saw her.
49. Ya sị ọnwa wụ miye ya!
He declared, “This is indeed my wife!”
He declared, “This is indeed my wife!”
50. Nde Nnọng Ibibie, wọ gbaa ikpu:
Nnọng Ibibie people, they whispered among themselves!
51. E gwere Ndukwụ Emea ni Mgbaafọ Kaalu.
They took Ndukwụ Emea and gave him to Mgbaafọ Kaalu.
52. “Go okuru lajekwa ogo ụnụq—
“Take him and return to your ogo—
Nne Mgbaafọ B1 (1971)  

53. Ife merenu go onwere obi  
ike zhiari ogo unuọ choọọ di  
gọ bia,  
Whatever gave you so strong  
a heart to come all the way  
from your ogo in search of  
your husband!  
54. Ihe di gị aji!"  
You are truly full of  
valor!"  

55. Ya kukwara di ya Ọghụ bia  
ule wej.  
And so she took her hus-
band in her arms and  
brought him back to their  
house.

49. Mgbaafọ kukwara di ya  
bia Nde-Awa-Ezema-
Elechi, weisa.  
An so Mgbaafọ took her  
husband in her arms and  
brought him back to Nde-
Awa-Ezema-Elechi.

50. Nwata nwaamị achọwa di  
ya, Yea di!8  
51. Nwata nwaamị achọwa  
di ya Yaa iya!  
52. Mgbaafọ, Q chọwa di ya,  
Yaa di!  
53. Nwata Nwaamị achọwa  
di ya, Yaa iya!  
54. Nwata Nwaamị achọwa di  
ya, Yaa iya!

NOTES

1. This is a slightly modified version of a paper originally pre-
sented at a staff and postgraduate seminar in the Department of  
Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Ibadan, 15 Jan-
uary 1981.

2. For detailed ethnographic information of the formerly war-
like and head-hunting Igbo people of Qhafia in the Cross River  
area of southeastern Nigeria, see my doctoral thesis (Azuonye,  
1979) and also Nsugbe, 1974.

3. Singers A, B, C, and F are four of six singers studied in my  
doctoral thesis (Azuonye, 1979). The two others, mentioned else-
where in this paper, are Ogbaa Kaalu of Abia (Singer D) and
Echeme Ugwu of Ebem (Singer E). The alphabet codes refer to the chronological order in which the first recordings of the performances of the singers were made. Apart from the recording of the performance of Singer A, which was made for a Radio Nigeria (Enugu) broadcast by Mr. Chijioke Abagwe, in 1966, all the recordings were made in the field by myself between 1971 and 1977. See Azuonye 1981b for detailed information regarding the contexts of the recordings. It is, however, worth pointing out here that the actual context in which an Qhafia epic song is performed plays little or no significant role in determining the changes which individual singers make in their renditions of various tales. The songs are not context-bound and the changes are essentially a matter of personal taste effected albeit in accordance with the aesthetic principles discussed briefly in this paper and in more detail elsewhere (Azuonye 1979: Chapter 9; 1981a; and 1981d).

4. Charts I and II use abstract renditions of the thematic constituents of the narratives as in Lord (1968: Appendix II). This is regrettable; but as the texts involved are relatively long, a comparison of the full texts would have resulted in an article probably three times as long as the present one. In order to give the reader some idea of the texture of the compositions, two complete, but shorter, texts are compared in Chart III. Some of the texts compared in charts I and II have been reproduced in full elsewhere (Azuonye, 1979: Appendix I) while others will appear in my forthcoming book, Epic Poetry of the Obafia Igbo, from the Performance of Kaaly Iigirigiri.

5. If Finnegan had confined her discussion to long praise poems, oracular and divination chants, and similar genres, her argument would have been less controvertible. But by citing the Sunjata epic and adducing Innes's observation as evidence, she seems to have stepped well beyond the confines of "relatively long quasi-narrative forms" in which memorization and exact reproduction can be said to operate. There is, however, one question regarding the possibility of memorization in the transmission of such long forms that Finnegan has not even raised: Is it possible for an oral performer to memorize a composition of any length both without the aid of writing and of formulas (aide-memoires)? I cannot be persuaded to believe that by sheer ratiocination an unlettered singer or chanter can, without the aid of mnemonic devices of any kind, compose and memorize long stretches of verse and recollect what he has memorized faithfully whenever he is called upon to render it. I believe firmly that the oral-formulaic theory applies as
much to memorized compositions as to those composed in the oral
performance.

6. For the background to Finnegan’s position on the oral-
formulaic theory of Parry and Lord, see her earlier studies (1974
and 1976).

7. Cf. Lord (1968: 26-29); Nagler (1974: 199); and Okpewho

8. See Theme 54 [Chart I above] for the translation of the re-
peated line of this song. The choruses, “Yeadi?, “You ija!,” etc.,
are chanted back by the audience.

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