



## Performing Audience

### On the Social Constitution of Focused Interaction at Celebrations in Mali

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**Abstract.** – Performance, as seen for instance in the works of Erving Goffman or Karin Barber, is often defined by a rather strict distinction of roles between performers and audiences. Traditional celebration culture in Mali, however, provides social situations that offer structures not only of role distinction but also of role-switching and role-blurring. It is a key feature of the audience at vernacular celebrations in Mali that the repertoire of responses *to* performance includes taking part *in* performance. The present analysis of social interaction during *jembe* drum/dance performances in Bamako, Mali, thus might help to differentiate our theoretical conception of performance and audience, and contribute to the anthropology of celebration and the history of media practice in West Africa. Drum/dance performance at celebrations is participatory performance; it presents a context of public representation and embodiment of community at the same time. [*Mali, performance, audience, celebration, interaction, jembe drum*]

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This article will focus on the structure of interaction at celebrations held on the occasion of transition rites, such as name-givings, circumcisions, and marriages, in Bamako, Mali. Celebrations in southern Mali involve the consumption of great quantities of food, the ritual exchange of words and goods, song and instrumental music (mainly drum ensemble, such as *jembe* music), and

dance collaboratively performed and attended by the gathered participants. Audience in this context implies not only that the people gathered listen to the praise and music, watch dancers and the presentation of gifts, and respond, for example, by singing along, clapping their hands, and yelling enthusiastically, but also that they take turns performing themselves. Performance at celebrations is participatory.

Karin Barber (1997) outlined the growing field of research that deals with the contribution of audiences to the constitution of public spheres, social collectivities, and cultural meanings in Africa. In the following I will seek to elaborate on her basic statement that “performances constitute audiences, and vice versa” (Barber 1997: 353). Drawing on concepts developed by Erving Goffman (1959, 1961, 1963), audience is analyzed as a role and function complementary to performance in the context of public gatherings. I will leave aside questions of larger effects on cultural forms, social identities, and political horizons, and rather study how audience itself is constituted, organized, and embodied in situated social interaction, and what it contributes to the activity system in the context of which it occurs.

The article is structured as follows: First of all, I will explain theoretically what I mean by “audience,” and then introduce the social context of wedding celebrations in Bamako. Analytic sections will deal in turn with the participatory structure of interaction that allows for taking turns dancing, with the role and function of the audi-

ence, and with the specialized roles of professional drummers and video producers. Finally, I will place the findings in the context of the anthropology of celebration and the history of media practice in West Africa.

## 1 A Sociological Concept of the Audience of Performance

With reference to a definition of performance as a display of communicative competence, Barber (1997: 347) defines audience as:

the body of people prepared to grant the performer space and time in which to mount . . . a display, by suspending or bending the normal patterns of communicative turn-taking . . . what creates an audience is the listeners' intentional orientation towards the speaker.

The concept of audience in live events is commonly associated with a distinct subgroup among the participants, established by its members' sharing the same specific position and role in interaction, i.e., being addressed by, confronted with, and excluded from the role of performing. One speaks of audience mainly in the case of performance genres characterized by a one-way presentation of something by one group (the performers) to another, different group (the audience). This unilateral concept of audience makes it seem absurd to view celebrations, games, or rituals as performance, because action groups in these frameworks address themselves more than they do an essentially stable and permanent social body of confronted nonperformers. To approach the practice, function, and role of audience in participatory performances such as wedding celebrations in urban West Africa, a more inclusive concept of audience is needed. I will attempt to derive such a concept from sociologist Erving Goffman's seminal studies of face-to-face behavior in everyday social life.

In his first book, Goffman (1959) adopted the vocabulary of dramaturgy as a set of metaphors for the analysis of everyday persons' techniques and strategies of presenting themselves in dramatic, idealized, and controlled ways to others as a key element of social interaction. The function of the role of audience in this context is to witness and socially validate the presentations of performing individuals or teams in interaction. "Performance" here does not refer to the display of only artistic or other special competence, but to all socially competent behavior

. . . which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. Taking a particular participant and his performance as a basic point of reference, we may refer to those who contribute the other performances as the audience, observers, or co-participants (Goffman 1959: 15 f.).

Audience in this sense refers not only to some group of listeners or spectators who are not themselves performing, but to all participants in a situation who perform social roles which are complementary to the performance of another role and functional to the system of interaction. This is to conceive of the performance of any social role's "role-others" as its "audience" (Goffman 1961: 85). The emerging concept of performance and audience is basically relational and dynamic: Each act of audience is another performance, and each string of interaction of performance and audience changes the present social context. This concept does not refer to relationships between social groups, but to relationships between roles in interaction. In contrast to Barber's definition cited above, it includes everyday interaction marked by taking turns, as in talking, greeting, or playing games.

In his dramaturgical approach, however, Goffman works out in detail mainly the conditions, devices, and techniques for the staging of "pure" performance, where the performing team hides the process of impression management from the audience, and where breaks in the distinction between performance and audience are not tolerated. He thus comes close to reifying the social role and function of audience as "the" audience in the sense of a distinct social group, and excluding the more "impure" or participatory forms of performance from being studied in dramaturgical terms. I would argue that he was somewhat hasty, when he stated that no individual – with the exception of some specific discrepant roles – must be allowed to join both performance and audience in the same situation. He was hasty, when he insisted that the two basic implications of the human need for social contact, i.e., the need for an audience to present oneself to, and the need for teammates with whom to enter into conspiratorial intimacies and "backstage" relaxation, *principally* have to be segregated by team and region boundaries (Goffman 1959: 206). He actually touched on, but did not take seriously the possibilities that, first, an individual performer is so taken in by his own act that he comes to be his own audience, and, second, that a performance team plays to itself instead of to a differentiated audience team.

For a systematic elaboration of the latter case, one has to go beyond Goffman's dramaturgical approach from "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (1959) and turn to his subsequent books, "Encounters. Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction" (1961) and "Behavior in Public Places. Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings" (1963). The point of departure in these studies is no longer the individual's basic need to present himself, but the richness of information flow and facilitation of feedback between givers and receivers which is typical of face-to-face interaction. Goffman approaches the social order of interaction at public gatherings on three analytic levels, the identification of which will be helpful in the analysis of participatory performance in Mali. A "gathering" is defined as "any set of individuals whose members include all and only those who are in one another's immediate presence." The "situation" he defines as "the full spatial environment anywhere within which an entering person becomes a member of the gathering . . . Situations begin when mutual monitoring occurs." A "social occasion" is "a wider social affair, undertaking, or event, bounded in regard to place and time, and typically facilitated by fixed equipment; a social occasion provides the structuring social context in which many situations and their gathering are likely" to occur (Goffman 1963: 18).

According to Goffman, situational proprieties or rules of conduct in public gatherings are basically norms or values concerning the regulation of the participants' mutual accessibility and the patterned distribution of their involvement, i.e., of their attention, bodily orientation, and attachment to some ongoing activity.<sup>1</sup> In the context of this analytic framework, I will restrict the use of the term "audience" to tightly – but not necessarily rigidly – structured situations where all participants share a common focus of attention. In other words, only when there are systematic restrictions on the participants' possibilities to show different main involvements outside the situation as well as divisive ones within it, will I speak of audience.

Let me give a fictitious (counter-)example: I would not speak of an audience when, at a university students' party in Germany, some people hang around, obviously without being involved in particular encounters with others, cursorily monitoring the sparsely clad dancers and several rounds of informal talk around the room. These bystanders

<sup>1</sup> These thoughts are extensively developed throughout Goffman (1963); see for example pp. 22, 36, and 193.

would behave inappropriately obtrusively if they were to stare openly at others engaged in talk or dance. But if someone were to raise his voice loudly in an unfriendly tone and make a scene for those people he is immediately engaged with, many of the bystanders would likely spontaneously turn to this engagement, just as some of the dancers and groups of talkers would stop what they were doing and observe the scene. The one making the scene has tried to decisively transform the situation to the end of creating what I would then call an audience. His personal presentation in a face-to-face engagement has now – essentially – developed into the main focus of attention and main involvement of the gathering at large, even if only for a few seconds. As his audience, those who just a second before had been bystanders, dancers, or engaged in talk would neither be full participants in the direct face-to-face encounter from within which the scene emerged nor would they any longer be standing outside it. Thus a large number of participants in the gathering have been integrated into a more centrally focused situation marked by a differentiation of the accessibility of and obligation to presentation and attention.

An inspired performance can create audience in almost any situation. Yet since causing a scene is considered inappropriate at students' parties in Germany, it requires special effort, and it will be difficult to create and sustain a focus of attention for more than a few minutes. In certain situations, however, a particular main involvement is seen as an intrinsic part of the social occasion on which the situation occurs, and will be defined as preferential if not obligatory, i.e., again according to Goffman, as the participants' situated and occasioned main involvement. It is in these contexts that audience structures appear most regularly, permanently, and seemingly "naturally," i.e., appear as an embodiment of situated action roles.

## 2 The Social Situation of Wedding Celebrations in Bamako

In Bamako agrarian, Islamic, and national holidays have lost much of their former significance in terms of public celebration.<sup>2</sup> Instead, life cycle rituals have emerged as the most prominent and frequent, in certain seasons literally daily

<sup>2</sup> Village celebrations in the south and north of Bamako are held on various social occasions, including collective agricultural work, Islamic holidays, circumcision rites, and weddings.

occasions for collective festivity in the residential areas of the city since the end of World War II. Weddings, in particular, have become increasingly important, while circumcision celebrations, which were traditionally considered to represent festivity *par excellence* and were celebrated at great expense all-nightlong, have become less significant.<sup>3</sup>

Wedding celebrations in Bamako are in principle open for everyone. There are no spatial, commercial, or social boundaries such as fences, entrance fees, or norms excluding noninvitees that restrict access to the situation. However, urban celebration culture is a heavily gendered framework which generally keeps males from participating. While the urban marriage ritual (*kònyò*), like ritual culture as a whole, is predominantly controlled by men (Brand 1995), the corresponding wedding celebrations have emerged as an almost exclusively female public domain. First, the festivities are organized by women, namely by the so-called honorary mothers (*denbaw*), who are recruited specifically for this purpose from among female relatives of the bride's mother,<sup>4</sup> with financial and other assistance from their kin, neighbors, and friends. Second, participation in celebrations, too, is mainly female. Almost no men attend, except for some professionals in the service industry, who I will deal with later.

A typical celebration attracts a gathering of one or two hundred and up to three hundred people (Fig. 1). Participants can be roughly classified into four categories according to their different connections to the social occasion: First, there are the *denbaw*, responsible for the situation and embodying the occasion,<sup>5</sup> and their close relatives.

3 A survey in Bamako during 12 months in 1997/98 showed weddings to account for as much as 90% of professional drummers' engagements. This development might correspond, first, with the process of the marriage-based nuclear family beginning to succeed larger kin groups as the basic unit of social organization in urban colonial West Africa (Little 1970: 87), and, second, with the fact that various propagandistic campaigns by (para-)statal institutions against the conspicuous consumption of material resources at celebrations specifically addressed circumcision festivals in the late 1960s and 1970s.

4 -w marks the plural form of nouns in Bamanankan, the vernacular language of Bamako. *Denba* literally means "child-mother." In order to distinguish the role of *denbaw* in celebration culture from biological and classificatory mothers, who are also called *denbaw* in other social contexts, I borrow the term "honorary mother" from Modic (1996: 110).

5 Brides and bridegrooms, and those responsible for the marriage proper, i.e., male family heads and ritual and legal specialists, do not play any role, and indeed do not even show up at the celebrations.

Second, the organizers personally invite several dozen or, depending mainly on financial resources, even hundreds of guests from among their kin, neighbors, friends, and professional colleagues. The third category consists of professionals who are engaged and paid for diverse performance and service activities such as instrumental music,<sup>6</sup> singing, and the video recording of the ceremony. Whereas most singers, like the organizers and guests, are female, drummers and filmmakers are exclusively male. The fourth category consists of participants without a direct connection to the social occasion. These are passersby and residents of the neighborhood, typically children and young women, who are spontaneously attracted by the music, the dancing, the splendid gowns, or the joyous crowd.

Celebrations usually take place in the open street just outside the family's compound. An awning and 50 to 150 small chairs are rented from specialized celebration outfitter microenterprises. The awning is put up across the street between roofs, trees, masts, or improvised pillars in order to shield the celebration or the better part of it, at least, from the sun. The chairs are put up neatly in a wide circle or rectangle some time before the event is ready to start. The participants take their seats or stand behind the row of chairs. Thus a basically circular spatial arrangement is set: The circle of participants, all looking inwards, outwardly bounds the gathering and internally structures interaction, as I will describe below.

This situation certainly is not prearranged as rigidly into regions which predispose the participants' positions, orientations, and action roles as is the case with audiences sitting in front of a stage at, for example, the Palais de la Culture or the Centre Culturel Français, where concerts, plays, and ballets are held in Bamako. However, the circular situation of celebrations, too, is clearly differentiated, as I will briefly describe.

The drummers usually show up first. When they sit down and put down their instruments, they define a front side within the circle where the central action and main focus will be. Aware of this, they estimate the reach of shadow of the awning and close buildings, because they need to protect themselves and their extremely sensitive goatskin drumheads from the sun all-daylong; they survey the ground in terms of evenness,

6 In the following, I will focus on *jembe* drumming, which has been the most popular form of instrumental celebration music in Bamako since the 1960s.



**Fig. 1:** Small celebration (about 150 participants) on the occasion of a name-giving; Bamako 1994 (R. Polak).

stones, and puddles, with the heavy dancing that will mainly take place directly in front of them in mind; and they make sure that they have an unrestricted view of the fairground before taking their seats. The singers sit down just beside the drummers. The organizers, too, usually sit together in one corner, often close to the professionals. Guests make up for the other three-quarters or so of the circle. Whereas professionals, organizers, and guests occupy chairs to the extent that they are available, the seniors among them at least, the majority of attracted passersby, children, and youths will have to stand behind them. Thus the situation is clearly differentiated even before interaction has fully developed: Three subgroups (professionals, organizers, and guests) each occupy a certain segment within the circle of seated participants, while spectators fill the line and crowd behind. Most attendants are easy to recognize as

belonging to one of the subgroups thanks to the combination of spatial positions as just described, and by their equipment, dress, and bearing: The drummers have their drums with them and appear either in everyday work clothes or in individualistic, extravagant performance dress. The griots, who make up the majority of the singers, wear splendid dress, show grace and difference in posture and style, and often loudly praise arriving guests. The organizers wear specific headbands (*denbajanlanw*) in distinctive colors, and other symbolic items (Fig. 2). The guests wear the most representative dress they currently have available. Sometimes two or more guests appear wearing the same clothing, expressing special respect for the present (or a past) occasion by having agreed upon investing considerable money in a common uniform. Many spectators wear everyday clothing.

### 3 Performing in Turns

In this section I will outline the structure of interaction, and more specifically the participants' access and obligation to the role of performance at wedding celebrations in Bamako. The basic units and dynamics of joint performance consist in the alternation between one mode of action marked by song and stately formation dance, and a second marked by a swift succession of energetic encounters between the lead drummer and dancers coming forward individually or in pairs.

Typically, each piece starts with a song, which is a "call to dance," as the term *donkili* may be literally translated.<sup>7</sup> The drummers almost immediately take up the corresponding rhythm. Shortly thereafter, some participants start a slow-paced, dignified dance in single file that moves round concentrically within the circle of participants. Individuals who want to take part simply rise from their chairs or leave where they have been standing, one by one or in small groups, and graciously, with measured stride and gently swaying gait, walk towards the inner ground, and join the line. Some individuals or groups, as, for example, the honorary mothers, may be personally called upon by the singers and/or drummers (Fig. 7).

After perhaps 20 or 30 out of the roughly 200 participants have taken their places in the line and the tempo and atmosphere have picked up sufficiently, it dissolves into either a smaller semicircle close to the drummers or back into the larger circle. Then one or two women at a time break out from the semicircle or the larger circle in order to dance, vigorously now, directly interacting with the drummers. When a dancer, in dialogue with the lead drummer, has progressively performed a certain repertoire of movements and exhausted her physical endurance, she strives for a finale with the utmost energy (Fig. 3), sometimes communicating this to them with a short glance, looking for a moment of eye-to-eye contact, or by a whispered "sssss," then she is cut off by a drum break and synchronically performs a concluding step, sometimes resembling the classic telemark position for a ski jumper's landing, and finally heads off sideways, bounds back to her place and joins the circle again. This kind of drum/dance encounter as a rule develops in about ten to twenty seconds; an average piece of one formation



Fig. 2: *Denba* (honorary mother) participates in a group dance performance at a wedding celebration; Bamako 1995 (R. Polak).

dance and five to ten individual encounters lasts three to four minutes, and is one stage of the sequence of celebrations, which usually lasts between two and four hours. In practice, though, timing is predominantly task-oriented: Each encounter lasts precisely as long as the dancer takes to carry out her turn, and each piece as long as it takes for everyone who wants to dance to have her turn.

The order of programs at a celebration, unlike, for example, the theatrically staged African ballets based on the same repertoire of performance elements, is prearranged neither in content (which song? which rhythm? which dance?) nor in the details of interaction sequences (who will perform which parts with whom for how long?). Rather it is worked out spontaneously in the course of interaction. It is essential to maintaining the ongoing flow of interaction that the access and allocation of the dancer's role to particular individuals is explicitly structured and made comprehensible. This is achieved, first, through the indexicality or expressivity generally characteristic of social action in face-to-face relation-

<sup>7</sup> See Traoré (2000: 135–152) for a discussion of song/*donkili* as a Manding performance genre.



**Fig. 3:** Madu Jakite (center), Musa Kamara (right), and an anonymous drummer (left) engage with a solo dancer; Bamako 1994 (R. Polak).

ships,<sup>8</sup> and, second, by special action roles that are intentionally designed to maintain order.

Let me shortly touch on the indices in the dancers' behavior that allow everyone to foresee their actions. A first and fairly obvious cue to their intentions is that they have to stand up or break from the bounding circle before they approach and enter the focused performance region. Some, moreover, prepare themselves by straightening up and stretching for a moment, by stripping off their sandals and gathering and tightening the bindings of their dresses, or by taking up a spring in their steps, already in time with the musical rhythm. These are quite clear indices to the meaning of the action they are about to develop. Beyond this, there is a way of symbolically assigning the role of performer-to-be by throwing a scarf to someone or winding it around his or her waist. Some self-confident would-be dancers, conscious of their performance role, carry out all these minisequences of action more dramatically in order to make the indices particularly visible and clear, as if to say, "Hey, here I come to dance!" They sometimes even conspicuously walk around the inner fairground to fish for scarves while stretching and tugging at their dresses like

athletes on the sidelines, eager to substitute other players.

Talking of ordinary activities such as standing up and stripping off one's sandals might seem pedestrian in that they seem lacking in cultural specificity and weight. However, they are of great functional significance concerning the social constitution of performance. The drummers in particular constantly monitor the situation for such signals, because they have to always be prepared a second or two in advance of a spontaneous performance in order to be able to appropriately react and control the unfolding interaction. Yet the indexicality of the spontaneous dance activity is essential for the dancers themselves, too, because they not only have to observe the engagement presently going on in order to recognize the exact moment when their own turn comes, but they have also to take a glance to the left and right to see whether there are other aspirants waiting for an encounter. They thus can spontaneously decide whether to try and get there first, to stand back and wait a turn,<sup>9</sup> or to go regardless of their competitors, running the risk of creating situational disorder, thus spoiling the possibility of a successful engagement for anybody for the moment.

As regards special roles that maintain the order of interaction, two are of outstanding significance at wedding celebrations in Bamako: One is played by self-appointed "guardians of space," whose duties I will discuss in the next section. Another is

<sup>8</sup> Harold Garfinkel's (1967: chapter 1; cf. Heritage 1984: chapter 6) ethnomethodological approach emphasizes that indices which render visible and explicable ("accountable" in his terminology) the sense which interaction partners have to make of actions are implicit in these very actions, while Goffman in his dramaturgical approach (1959) emphasized that expressive aspects of social interaction are explicitly worked out. It seems to me that both aspects are important to understand how social interaction works.

<sup>9</sup> Missing a turn is problematic, because it is difficult to maintain one's energy at the appropriate (extremely high) level for even ten seconds without taking action.

fulfilled by the instrumental musicians. The drum ensemble accompanies, coordinates, and synchronizes all contributions to the joint performance. The lead player in particular has specific drum patterns at his disposal for a variety of specific functions: to call for a specific rhythm that goes along with a certain song, to ornament and accompany a formation dance, and to individually provoke, focus, heat up, and cut off encounters with solo dancers. On the level of repertoire, there is a highly differentiated body of about 60 individual drumming rhythms (each of which contains several specific patterns as mentioned above). Each rhythm is more or less associated with one or several attributes of the participants' personal identities. Every age-group, ethnic or regional identity, and social status group, which is typically present at celebrations as well as some occasion-specific positions such as that of the *denbaw*, can be addressed using specific parts of the repertoire at certain stages of the celebration.

Songs and rhythms are chosen by the professionals in order to make dance a certain part of those present, or they are requested by those who want to dance. Let me give an example: When I took part in an afternoon celebration in 1997, the rhythm corresponding to "my" patronymic and status group<sup>10</sup> was played by my colleagues, and I was thrown a scarf. I was a bit shy then, and was happy to have the chance to stick to (and hide myself behind) the drum which I was playing at the moment. When, after a few pieces, I passed the drum on to a friend of mine who took over from me, he asked: "Why didn't you dance to your own rhythm, show yourself to the gathering, show that you belong to us?"

Guests and organizers in particular are frequently invited and expected to perform. Their dancing is more than personal recreation and entertainment; it is a social obligation to show their share of personal involvement in the gathering and attachment to the social occasion. Common participation in dance is thus absolutely indispensable; it is at the heart of the success or failure of each celebration.<sup>11</sup>

The social structure of performance in urban celebrations is complex. There are three levels on

which participants can be assigned social positions and corresponding roles. The first concerns social status and identity in the larger societal system, defined, for example, by bearing a certain patronymic, which is associated with certain status groups, ethnic or regional identities, and kin groups. The second is the position relative to the social occasion of the celebration. On this level I have distinguished organizers, guests, professionals, and spectators as the four main categories. Each participant can be addressed and invited to dance on both of these levels by specific songs and rhythms. The third level refers to spatial positions and activity roles in the situated interaction order such as drumming, dancing, singing, and looking on from the circle. It is on this level that one can differentiate between performance and audience.

Now consider the structural relations between roles on the different levels just distinguished above. The subroles of a participant's role-set can very much cohere. This is the case with the drummers, who form a distinct group well-defined by their professional status in society, by their commercial relationship to the social occasion, and by their highly specialized performance role. Such is also the case with the singers, predominantly recruited from the traditional occupational and status group of griots, who are attached to the occasion in either well-defined client-patron relationships or, like the drummers, by way of market relationships, and perform the role of singing, with some exceptions, to the exclusion of most other participants.

But this is *not* the case with dancing. While the drumming and singing are more or less exclusively performed by groups of professionals, participants of all social statuses, professions, classes, ages, and ethnic or regional identities take on the role of dance performance. Participants of all positions as defined by relationship to the occasion, all organizers, guests, professionals, and spectators, too, may take turns dancing. As already stated, celebrations are profoundly accessible in that any passerby or bystander can fully join the gathering just by placing himself or herself in the circle of audience which bounds the situation. The point I want to make here is that they are also profoundly participatory in that every participant can claim the performance role of dancing and main focus of attention just by going for it at the right moment. Even spectators who do not have direct relations to the social occasion, and thus do not (unlike the others) have an occasioned interest and social obligation to publicly present themselves to the gathering, are by no means denied the right to do so. Everyone is invited to perform. Whoever

10 It is common practice in southern Mali to attach a certain identity to foreign researchers showing some involvement and willingness to participate in the local culture.

11 Roderick Knight (1984) first reported on the open, participatory, and inviting quality of drum/dance celebrations in contrast to the more unidirectional presentation of griots' performances in Mande societies. See also Charry (2000: 193–198).

comes forward to dance will be taken seriously by the drummers and welcomed by the audience.

Role-switching from audience to dance performance and back is not the exception to a rule but a basic element of situated interaction at celebrations. This movement to and fro between outer circle and inner front region, this exchange of roles between audience and performance makes it possible for essentially all participants to share in performance.

In short, some performance roles at celebrations are differentiated, but the central one is not. Drumming and singing are separated roles exclusively performed by professionals. The role of dancing, however, is widely accessible, inclusive, and integrating. The social structure of interaction at celebrations cannot be assessed simply in terms of either exchange or separation of roles. It is their combination, it is both public participation *and* social differentiation that make up the specific, very intense character of performance and involvement at celebrations in Bamako.

#### 4 The Role and Function of Audience

The main point of the last section was to show that action roles of performance and audience do not necessarily need to be fully segregated and permanently allocated to different groups. I have outlined the syntactic scheme of interaction that allows for this, and have mentioned some of the small indices and symbols that make the basic turn-taking in dance performance clearly foreseeable and accountable for the interaction partners. This and the following sections are dedicated more specifically to analyzing what audience contributes to performance, to the public gathering, and social occasion of celebrations at large.

Access and obligation to the audience role are closely connected to the social situation. On the one hand, bystanders and passersby who stay outside the circle remain excluded from the situation and thus are excluded from the role of audience. Sometimes the circle of participants is so densely crowded that it presents an impenetrable boundary to the outsiders' view of what is going on inside.<sup>12</sup> But sometimes it is not, and in precisely



**Fig. 4:** While several candidates for a solo dance and children spectators press into the fairground, the sequence of turns and spatial arrangement of the situation still is rather orderly; Bamako 1994 (R. Polak).

these situations does it become clear that looking on from outside and participating in audience are two different things: When men pass by or gather nearby in some different engagement, such as a round of talk and drinking tea, they typically behave with studied reserve, showing pointed indifference to the women's songs, dress, and dances, and to the men's drumming. If, however, young males are actually interested in watching women dance (Claudia Roth [1995: 206] talks of young unmarried women's drum/dance encounters in neighboring Burkina Faso as silent courting, and some men in Bamako see it the same way), they do not openly stare at them. They take only short glances or, if they want to watch for a longer period of time, do so furtively. Not part of the situation, their open observation would not be interpreted as audience, but would instead reveal a more personal interest, which would be considered inappropriate. Therefore, this is avoided.

<sup>12</sup> There are only relatively few multistory buildings, and, more importantly, there is no culture of sitting by the window and looking outside, or of lingering on balconies or rooftop terraces in Bamako's *quartiers populaires* that would allow regular spectatorship of street celebrations from above.



**Fig. 5:** A situation of extreme heat at a rural circumcision celebration. Drummers, dancers, and spectators mingle to such an extent that the order of interaction might crumble soon; Sonincenin, Beledugu region, some 40 km north of Bamako, 1994 (R. Polak).

On the other hand, anyone who *does* enter the circle and join the situation is *expected* to perform as audience. Audience first implies showing involvement in the dominant song/dance or drum/dance engagements by attentive listening, watching, and, potentially, responding, for example, by clapping one's hands, singing along, commenting, yelling, and shouting. It also implies that one does not establish alternative main involvements. Participants may, of course, engage in short talks with their neighbors for a time, or observe other people in the circle. But they would rarely form different subcircles, turning their backs to the center, or openly stare in a different direction for long. Finally, the role of audience implies that the members show accessibility to their own engagement in performance activity. Each listener, each person watching performance from the circle is not only invited, but more or less obliged to respond by either rising to dance or making a cash gift when addressed by a singer or approached in their seat by the drummers. Turn-taking in performance as described in the last section is part and parcel of the role of audience.

Participatory interaction at celebrations is essentially dependent on the practice of audience to work and make sense. Audience in a large gathering embodies physical and emotional energy – addressed in Bamanankan as “heat” (*kalanya*) –, a kind of reservoir of performance-oriented agency which is indispensable to interaction in celebrations in Mali. It serves to situate, witness, recognize, and feed performance, it socially validates the gathering and publicly acknowledges its participants' attachment to the social occasion. In the

following, I will bring forth some evidence of the significance of audience by describing how people try to avoid circumstances that hinder visual publicity.

First, audience – rather than performance – needs light. Thus, people avoid celebrating in total darkness. Evening and all-night celebrations, just as holidays in general, are preferably scheduled around the 10th day of the month, in the second quarter of the moon. While this might have cosmological and symbolic meanings, it is certainly also preferred for practical reasons, i.e., because of the light the nearly full moon provides. In addition, one arranges for electric light, if available, or kerosene lanterns. In the urban context, the video team's spotlights are doubly effective in lighting and focusing the scene for the camera and for the audience.

Second, audience needs a clear view. Participants have to stay in the circle and keep the inner region clear in order to be able to follow the performance. Sometimes the situation becomes confused when too many eager participants go forward for a drum/dance encounter at the same time (Fig. 4).

The situation may even dissolve into near chaos for a moment if the gathering's level of enthusiasm rises to such a degree that the whole party starts pressing inwards to get closer and closer to the focused action (Fig. 5). All are in the center, no one spectating from outside the circle: the end of both audience and performance, and of ordered interaction as a whole. Sometimes this is licensed at the very end of a celebration. When it happens in the course of an ongoing event, song, dance,



**Fig. 6:** Senior dancer prepared to act as a guardian of space already holding a whip in her hand; Kati 1995 (R. Polak).

and music will briefly come to a halt, and the situation will break up by everyone taking his or her place again amongst much laughter. Yet the occurrence of this kind of total participation in an imploding situation is a rare exception. As a rule, the situation remains fairly stable for long hours, despite the heated and exalted interaction. According to Goffman (1963: 210), the (con-)fusion of teams and regions is avoided, not least due to the work of guardians who have the special job of keeping order. At celebrations in Mali, when disorder is in the air because of people pressing in, someone will pull a branch off the nearest tree and drive the inward-pushing crowd back in line by whipping the foremost members' legs, or rather by a threatening gesture which dramatically indicates that he or she is very much prepared to do so (Fig. 6). The role of this "guardian of space" can be played by a supporting member of the drum ensemble or the singers' party, but can also be spontaneously taken on by any participant experienced in celebrating.

## 5 Professional Production of Audience

There is no one who observes everyone's taking their turn dancing with more involvement than the drummers. For hours they monitor the participants' (spontaneous) performances with great persistence, concentration, and respect. The drummers are open persons: They can be approached and engaged at will, at any time, without exploiting their accessibility or injuring their personal integrity. They never show impatience or ridicule anyone's contribution to joint performance, but rather grant attention, time, and space, and install as performer each individual aspirant. In cases of conflict, they try to serve all parties: When two ladies come in at the same time for a personal drum/dance engagement and one has to stay back, a good lead drummer will initially go to meet the first one, but will then immediately turn to the second and invite her to take her turn. On several occasions I was fortunate enough to witness the following scene, which I always found touching since, to me, it embodied the grace of participatory performance in general: In the course of a series of engagements with young athletic dancers, the tempo rose so high as to consequently exclude some older (or otherwise less athletic) women still waiting at the "sidelines," somewhere in between the circle of the audience and the central region, from further performance. The lead drummer then used a moment's pause in the sequence of youngsters rushing up in order to immediately turn to the older ladies, take up the same rhythm but at a slower pace again, namely at exactly the tempo at which they had tried to enter the ring before, and thus grant them their turns before a singer could start a new song.

The skills of showing involvement, accessibility, and respect (in addition to, of course, experience in celebration culture and musical skills) characterize particularly fine celebration drummers. Their personal engagement always appears immediate, without distance. They turn to the dancers through their posture and line-up, the orientation of their instruments, and their playing. Yet, while dancer and lead drummer directly interact with each other, their encounters often do not take place literally face-to-face: Dancers sometimes close their eyes, look to the ground or into the air (see Fig. 3). Quite in contrast, drummers do watch the persons they are playing to openly and constantly. While mediating the joint performance to the broader audience, from the dancers' point of view the drummers embody and provide audience.



**Fig. 7:** Jaraba Jakite addresses a honorary mother at a wedding; Bamako 1995 (R. Polak).

Analogously, the cameraman who shoots the wedding documentary and, in the case of an evening celebration, his lighting assistant not only capture in sound and images the actions they follow, but embody and enhance focused attention, transform, and validate specific details of the total interaction as relevant presentations, and generally radiate an aura of social significance. They, too, perform audience. Let me illustrate this by way of an example already alluded to before.

When a female griot singer starts praising an honorary mother sitting in her chair, this person's role instantly changes from audience – following and validating others' engagements – to performance. Typically, the drummers quickly line up in front of her and blast bursts of solo rolls as directly at her head as possible (Fig. 7).

The cameraman stands up next to them and films the griot and the drummers for a moment, but then keeps on filming the praised one and her seated neighbors for a much longer time. The honorary mother stays motionless for a short while, until she finally gets a wad of cash out of her purse and gives some to the griot, the drummers, and the cameraman. All eyes keenly follow her actions. Sometimes the larger audience from the circle cannot view this situation, because the griot, drummers, and cameraman form a small crowd milling around the praised person. The audience can then nevertheless follow the event, since people hear the praising and the drumming, and thus profit from the professionals' services as mediators. From the point of view of the praised person, however, the drummers, singer, and cameraman at this moment also represent im-

mediate audience and primary relays in a layered context of audience: The sitting person's presence is transformed into a performance of her identity through the immediate audience provided by the griot, the drummers, and the cameraman. At the same time, the musicians mediate the particular performance event to the gathering on the spot, and the filming crew electronically records the same event in order to mediate it to a more extended and diffuse circle of potential future viewers. The professionals' work of mediation feeds back different layers of audience and effectively amplifies its function: Attendance, involvement, and validation of social presentations are extended outwards and, at the same time, focused and intensified inwards. In a word, the service the professionals offer to the gathering in exchange for being paid consists not only in performing and mediating but also in producing and relaying audience, for consumption mainly by the organizers and their guests.

## 6 Perspectives

Both consumption- and production-oriented studies of live performance and electronic media increasingly acknowledge and highlight audiences' agency. Since the 1980s, sociologists and anthropologists have emphasized the active construction of personhood and identity in the context of *consumption* (Willis et al. 1990; Featherstone 1991; Friedman 1994). In the fields of ethnomusicology, the anthropology of art, performance studies, and the anthropology of verbal communication audiences appear as an important factor in the

cultural *production* of genres, styles, or forms, and their meanings. In a formulation exemplary of this approach, Duranti (1986) addressed “the audience as co-author,” in the sense that the audience’s interpretations and responses recontextualize, enlarge, and transform the meaning of utterances or texts.

The analytic approach of this article has focused on what the performance of audience contributes to the activity system it is part of. Drawing on Erving Goffman’s sociology of face-to-face behavior (1959, 1961, 1963), I have examined the role and function of audience in the context of focused interaction at public gatherings. This perspective integrates the processes of cultural production and consumption, which are often treated in isolation. On the other hand, some limitations of such an approach are evident as well: First, while it offers a view of the social structure of performative interaction, it does not necessarily bring out its cultural meaning. It can help to understand how such meaning is constituted, however, and, as a sociological perspective, will gain in value when combined with anthropological questioning of what meanings it produces. Second, it is obviously of limited reach as regards the evergrowing field of mass mediation of cultural products, where direct interaction between performance and audience no longer necessarily constitutes the social situations where the main action takes place. Lastly, I summarize the basic findings this approach has brought into perspective, and then consider what these might suggest to the established anthropology of traditional celebrations and the future problem of approaching the history of modern media use in West Africa from an interactionist perspective.

It is a key feature of audience at vernacular celebrations in Mali that the repertoire of responses to performance includes taking part *in* performance. As Ruth Stone (1988) puts it, “the audience in Africa is active, merging in and out of performing roles.” The distinction between performance and audience, conceived of in terms of roles in social interaction, is congruent with the social differentiation of groups of participants in some but not in all cases. Stable allocation of performance and audience roles to distinct groups by way of bending or suspending communicative turn-taking is but one of various possible modes of performative presentation. The widespread idea of audiences as distinct bodies of people who choose to consume what other groups supply is to be complemented by the possibility of more diversified sets and fluid allocation of roles in performance/audience interaction. Yet, however participatory the inter-

action at a gathering might be, each and every performance still needs to be presented to an audience to make sense. Life cycle celebrations in Mali are fundamentally dependent on audience, as only through the presence of participants who embody and show attention and attachment to the situated presentations are these presentations – and the gathering and the occasion in general – socially realized, recognized, and validated.

There are many enlightening descriptions of participatory performance at celebrations of different Mande-speaking groups in West Africa.<sup>13</sup> These do not explicitly take account of the role and function of audience. However, I would argue, the assumption of audience is implicit in most of them. It is simply not explained. Take, for example, Michael Jackson’s study of Kuranko celebrations at initiation rites.<sup>14</sup> Jackson interprets his experience and some insiders’ explanations of dancing at these events<sup>15</sup> as follows: “Dance and music move us to participate in a world beyond our accustomed roles and to recognize ourselves as members of a community, a common body” (Jackson 1989: 132). In a word, their “point is the creation of community” (135). Jackson emphatically refrains from using symbolist interpretations, yet nevertheless acknowledges that dancing is conspicuous action “*socially* implemented and *publicly* played out” (129; emphasis original). In other words, while ritual dancing at celebrations is in Jackson’s view not a *representation* of something outside itself, it is still *presentative* in character. Jackson, then, distinguishes between two aspects in his interpretation of community building: “Insofar as they permit each individual to play an active part . . . initiation rites maximize participation as well as information” (130). The aspect of collecting and recognizing presented information, I would argue, can be conceived of as what I have analyzed as

13 See, for example, Humbolt’s (1921: 140) colonial report, Keita’s (1950: 44–47) belletristic approach, or Hardin’s (1988) rich ethnography; Knight (1984) and Charry (2000) have already been cited above.

14 This text (1989: chapt. 8) is particularly significant because it forms a decisive point in Jackson’s existentialist plea for radical empiricism in anthropology, i.e., a radically participatory anthropology of body use and the embodied character of all social practices.

15 Participants held that the dancing took place “just for entertainment” or “for no other reason but to have everyone take part” (Jackson 1989: 132). Compare the similar statements on the meaning of participatory performance at celebrations in Bamako, as quoted from Modic (1996: 79): “It entertains you only. It is good. People will like it. You participate in what they organize . . . When you die, you go singly. Before you die, you should be in a crowd. That is good.”

the role and function of audience. When Jackson further arrives at the interpretation that “Kuranko intentionality is thus less of a conceptual willing than a bodily in-tension, a stretching out, a habitual disposition toward the world” (130), I would argue that this “world” in social practice is embodied in the activity of audience. Celebration can produce and reproduce community only through audience, embodying the social lifeworld for the actors – in this case, dancers –, who thus can present and at the same time address and recognize themselves as members of a community.

Finally, allow me to come back to the problem of how to approach social action in the context of modern media from an interactionist perspective. Such an approach would be useful insofar as it could potentially integrate to some extent the fields of study of, on the one hand, the anthropology of audience of live performance, and, on the other, the anthropology of media, which still focuses mainly on electronic mass media. Alfred Schutz’s (1976: 178) bold statement that all forms of possible communication can be explained as derived from interaction in face-to-face relationships leaves me feeling somewhat uncertain, I must admit. Perhaps I should demand less and speak of an interactionist point of departure. I see two such points as suggested by my analysis.

First, the section on musicians and film crews as relaying layers of audience has shown that, in the context of live performance at celebrations, both old and new, both tangible and electronic, both situation-bounded and mass communications media are used simultaneously and in relation to each other: Dancing bodies are perceived by watching bodies, drums beaten by pairs of hands are perceived by pairs of eyes and ears, by skin and stomach, videos of people performing with their bodies, demeanors and instruments are recorded with cameras and later watched on TV sets. Just as the presence of the camera at celebrations changes the context of action for the participants – roughly speaking by narrowing focus and widening audience –, one could possibly study how participants’ experience in celebration culture, on the one hand, and the presence of electronic recording devices for mass mediation, on the other, can shape local patterns of performance/audience interaction at concerts and other front-staged performances of the European in Africa. And one might question whether and how personal experiences and expectations in celebration and stage practices as contexts of live audience shape activities in production, marketing, distribution, and consumption of mass media such as music cassettes or videotapes.

So one could attempt to understand the processes of live audience and of mass-mediated audience as related contexts of social action.<sup>16</sup> While mass mediation is characterized by not necessarily involving face-to-face relationships between performers and audiences, the question raised would be to what extent their complex relationships, and the images and expectations they have of each other, are still conditioned by simultaneous and socially and economically related contexts of communication that do imply face-to-face interaction.

As a second point of departure for an interactionist study of the history of media and audiences in Africa, my article suggests that the degrees and forms of either commonality, or diffuseness, or differentiation of action roles, present an open and interesting problem. They should be empirically researched with regard to social and historical construction, rather than assumed as somehow given *a priori*. Let me exemplify with a last excursion, commenting on some paragraphs in “Making Music Together. A Study in Social Relationship” by Alfred Schutz (1976). Rereading his article while thinking about how to conclude my own, I was struck by the following sentence, which refers to the social function of the performer as an intermediary between composer and listener:

It is of no great importance whether performer and listener share together a vivid presence in face-to-face relation or whether through the interposition of mechanical devices such as records, only a quasi simultaneity between the stream of consciousness of the mediator and the listener has been established (1976: 174).

“No!” every section of my article seemed to exclaim for a moment, “it is of the utmost importance!” I had to recall that Schutz’s article was empirically grounded in his experience of classical Western music, situated in concert halls and opera houses, i.e., in core institutions of the bourgeois public, which were characterized by an extremely elaborate differentiation of composer’s, performers’, and listeners’ roles. It is only in this historically and socially particular situation that the “listeners’ copperforming . . . is merely an internal activity, an experience of inner time and a tuned-in relationship” (Schutz 1976: 175).

After these striking differences between classical music performance in Europe and participatory drum/dance performances in Mali, one gets quite

16 See Goodwin and Duranti (1992) for a concept of context developed in the field of linguistic anthropology, which focuses on actors’ perspectives, and which views communicative processes as interactive social phenomena.

the opposite idea of close affinity, when Schutz (1976: 176 f.) analyzes the relationship between musicians in copformance:

The cop performers . . . have to execute activities gearing into the outer world and thus occurring in spatialized outer time. Consequently, each cop performer's action is oriented . . . reciprocally by the experiences in inner and outer time of his fellow performer . . . Each of them has to take into account what the other has, therefore, to execute in simultaneity. He has not only to interpret his own part which as such remains necessarily fragmentary, but he has also to anticipate the other player's interpretation of his – the Other's – part and, even more, the Other's anticipations of his own execution.

Copformance in direct interaction in Schutz's conception is marked by sharing different dimensions of time, both inner and outer time, simultaneously experienced by the participants (1976: 177). This is just as true for performing together at celebrations in Mali as it is for making music together in Europe.

My point here is to show that it is possible to understand differences and similarities between classical European music and participatory African drum/dance performance by conceiving of situated activity systems in terms of performance and audience roles and their structural relationship. This allows us to both make comparisons and draw distinctions between types of social action such as, for example, celebrations and concerts, in different cultural, social, and historical contexts.

In a pioneering study on the origins of art (in the modern sense) in northern Côte d'Ivoire, Till Förster (1997: 488 f., 502 ff., 547–564) analyzes as a key factor the emergence of a socially differentiated audience which is no longer personally bound to performance by social relationships, and which is no longer participating in, but rather is confronted by performance. The process of ritual mask performances becoming public in the context of small towns, led to the development of different modes of experience, i.e., ritual experience by the insiders of the initiation society where the mask came from, and an aesthetic mode of experience (again in the modern sense) by outsiders, the noninitiated urban public.<sup>17</sup> One can distinguish between two primary aspects of this process of differentiation: first, the differentiation

of audience/performance roles, and second, the more general and permanent development of separate inventories of knowledge in different social groups as a context of understanding the same public presentations of artistic forms of expression. A comparative and historical study of audience/performance roles in expressive practices in and of African cities would appear a promising way to further investigate the issue Förster's study has brought to light.

Even the first, preliminary findings on urban celebrations in Bamako are interesting: On the one hand, the obvious and possibly most relevant hypothesis concerning the social history of performance, media, and audience contexts in urban West Africa, namely the progressive social differentiation of roles and increasing complexity of the networks their interactions form, seems to be substantiated by the processes of professionalization and commercialization of singing and drumming at celebrations in Bamako.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the primary performance role of dancing, which has been equally affected by attempts at commercially motivated professionalization since the 1970s, has, to date, shown surprisingly few signs of losing its accessible, immediate, and communal character, which I have attempted to present in this article. On the contrary: A considerable part of the creative change in celebration music has been oriented towards not only preserving but even cultivating and elaborating the participatory character of dance. The urbanization of celebration culture in the Malian metropolis has managed to combine the integration of a new, more heterogeneous, diffuse, anonymous, and extended public as audience with its old, participatory, and community-creating character.

This article is empirically based on regular observations and participation in celebrations in Bamako, the capital of the Republic of Mali, and rural areas (Manden, Beledugu) to the south and north of the metropolis, during 18 months of field research carried out in several stages throughout the 1990s. As part of a research project on professional music practice (Polak 2004, 2005a, 2005b), I performed at approximately 120 celebrations in southern Mali. I greatly appreciate the support of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Council), which financed 3 years of this research (1996–99), in the context of the research training group "Cross-Cultural Relationships in Africa" at Bayreuth University.

17 The German term for audience or spectatorship in this modern sense, *Publikum*, is etymologically derived from the Latin *publicum*, and historically borrowed via the French and English *public*.

18 See Modic (1996: chapt. 5) and Polak (2004, 2005a) for studies of these processes.

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