
Un/making difference through performance and mediation in contemporary Africa

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Introduction

This special issue of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* grew out of a panel we organized at the European Conference on African Studies in Lisbon in June 2013. Our starting point was the observation of a massive revival of cultural and religious identities across the African continent, stretching from post-apartheid South Africa to Islamist groups in parts of West Africa. In the early twenty-first century, Africa appears to be witnessing a historical moment characterized by a resurgence of a politics of difference that, regardless of the heterogeneous forms in which it materializes, shares an uncanny ability to produce and sustain identities based on a politics of difference.

We are not the first to address analytically the preoccupation with identity, belonging and politics of difference in Africa. The resurgence of difference politics has often been associated with the rise of neoliberalism after the end of the cold war (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). We similarly stress that attention needs to be paid to the social and material conditions under which identity and difference are affected, and to the broader political processes, at national and regional levels. At the same time, we insist that closer understanding is needed of the ways in which forms of cultural performance contribute to the very process of claiming and generating difference and identity.

Performance appears a particularly well-suited concept to comprehend this social phenomenon because, as Turner (1986) already noted, the concept stresses process, processual qualities and the dynamic features of social organization, instead of the fixity suggested by categories such as culture and identity. What is more, performance stresses the agency of subjects and the active, social construction of the social world. Therefore, as Kelly Askew (2002, 14–15) has it, performance is always ‘contingent, emergent, undetermined, and susceptible to unrehearsed actions’. Hence, the open-ness of performance permits a perspective that retains the recognition of the social construction of the social world, yet takes it further through recognizing the symbolic, as well as embodiment and enactment.

Contributions to this special issue address the following questions: How do performances facilitate sensorial and embodied experiences of difference on the one hand, or sharing and unmaking of difference on the other? And: How does performance make people feel difference, and its opposite, similarity, to be true, authentic and real?

Identity and belonging

Our discussion departs from critical appraisals of the concept of ‘identity’, which has come under much scrutiny, despite – and because – of its global and African currency in politics, culture and development discourse (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005, 2009). Following attempts to rethink identity as an analytical category, and to work with the notions of hybridity and creolization (e.g. Bhabha 1994; Hannerz 1987), some authors have called into question the usefulness of identity as a concept altogether, highlighting its ‘unfortunate tendency to fix what is in constant flux’ (Geschiere 2009, 31). Brubaker and Cooper (2000) went a step further and proposed to use the term ‘identity’ not as an analytical category but as a category of practice. They suggested paying attention to the meanings developed by social actors, as distinguished from the categories used by analysts.

Their suggestions have become significant for studies of political subjectivity. Geschiere and Nyamnjoh (2000) have argued that, following the end of the cold war and waves of democracy movements across the African continent, there has been a general obsession with discourses of autochthony and ethnic citizenship. These discourses define various understandings of ‘autochthony’ to the exclusion of those who are conceived as ‘strangers’ – that is, against all those who ‘do not belong’ because of, existing or imagined, socio-geographical difference. In a subsequent monograph, Geschiere (2009) expanded his argument beyond Africa, demonstrating that the upsurge of autochthony discourses has also been integral to politics in Western Europe. Here too, globalization processes have set off, and go together with, struggles over belonging that involve the sometimes violent exclusion of ‘strangers’.

Other authors have proposed getting rid of scholarly analysis of the problematic concept of identity altogether. Pfaff-Czarnecka (2011) proposes that the concept of ‘belonging’ be distinguished analytically from that of ‘identity’. She argues that the concept of belonging, ‘while taking up important preoccupations of the identity-concept, does more justice to the complexities, dynamics, and subtleties of human interrelating, to its situative and processual character than that of “collective identity” does’ (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011, 2). Essentially she maintains that identity insists on the clear-cut drawing of boundaries and on particularism, and that it is ‘prone to buttressing social divisiveness’. Belonging, on the other hand, through its emphasis on relationality ‘consists in forging and maintaining social ties and in buttressing commitments and obligations’ (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011, 4). She further points out that as a social location belonging relies on emotion, and that it is ‘easily felt and tacitly experienced’ (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011, 2). This emphasis on emotion, which she seems to use interchangeably with affect, inevitably brings on the notion of the sensual. In the remainder of this introduction we will develop further the sensual dimensions of belonging, and how these are made manifest in and through performance.

Performance

By ‘performance’, we refer to a realm of cultural practice in which people envision and create various aesthetic, expressive and symbolic forms, put them to the test and revise them. We frame this practice as a matter of performance to highlight their processual, dynamic and open-ended nature. That is, we are first and foremost interested in the very process of

making and ‘producing’ aesthetic and expressive forms, rather than in performance as a final product of aesthetic practice.

With this understanding of performance, we position ourselves within, yet also reach beyond, a scholarly tradition that studies performance as something ‘out of the ordinary’, that is, as practices, events and rituals framed by participants as something of a special, spectacular or aesthetic nature (e.g. Bauman 1992; Singer 1959, 1972). While we do not assume that a clear-cut distinction can be drawn between performance as a fenced-off genre or event on one side, and performance as an element of any social situation (see Schulz and Virtanen, forthcoming), we are particularly interested in realms of daily practice that revolve around aesthetic production.

It is important to comprehend performance not as role-play and imitation (mimesis) (as Goffman had it) but instead to follow Turner’s (1982) understanding of performance as creation (poesis), as the ‘making, not faking’ of social facts (Becker 2013, 15). Similarly, Fabian (1990, 9) emphasizes that performance is ‘creating’, rather than ‘representing’ socio-cultural texts. He makes the significant point that performance ‘does not “express” something in need of being brought to the surface, nor to the outside; nor does it simply enact pre-existing text’ (Fabian 1990, 9). Fabian (1990, 9) draws attention to the argument that ‘performance is the text in the moment of its actualization’. It is this actualization that authenticates the (social and cultural) text.

In another relevant body of literature, anthropologists such as Kaur (2005) and Askew (2002) have elaborated on the connections between performance and the politics of belonging. Nationalism has been of particular interest to them; similar to Meyer’s (2009) more recent critique they have pointed out the limitations of Benedict Anderson’s (1983) notion of imagined communities. Askew (2002) has argued that Anderson’s model does not explain why the imagination of belonging and difference actually ‘works’. What makes people believe the imaginary to be real? Kaur (2005, 4–5) has emphasized that, ‘the viscosity of performances – gatherings, marches, campaigns, ceremonies, festivals, processions, and so forth’ are relevant modes of apprehending the nation, which are not only affected through the media, as Anderson argued.

Yet another body of literature has pointed out that, instead, politics of belonging frequently draw on discourses and performances of cultural heritage.

Heritage and authenticity

Our interest in how cultural heritage is claimed and generated through performance draws inspiration from studies of cultural artifacts and heritage politics that stress that the ‘authentic’ cannot be defined in essentialist terms, but results instead from the operation of cultural forms and symbolic mediation (e.g. Dominguez 1989; Handler 1996; Handler and Linnekin 1984; Keane 2003; Rowlands and de Jong 2007). Typically, these studies trace the process by which certain cultural forms become emblematic of a particular (national or local) tradition. Yet although notions of the ‘authentic’ and ‘authenticity’ play

an important role in their argument, they do not systematically explore how the aesthetic and sensory appeal of these forms achieves the work of ‘authentication’.

Lindholm (2008) has argued that the notion of authenticity is regularly accompanied by processes of authentication, in which people have at their disposal resources and techniques, which they use to realize an authentically felt grounding to the social and cultural constructions that make up their lives. This recognition

calls attention to the question how constructions, even though admittedly ‘in the making’, are fashioned in such a way that they can be experienced as persuasively ‘authentic’ and ‘real’; that is, how mediated cultural forms operate through processes of authentication. (Meyer et al. 2008, 4)

Of key relevance, here, is scholarly work that, located at the intersection of religious studies and anthropology, proposes a ‘materialist’ approach to questions of authenticity and authentication. Novel about the recent materialist turn in studies on religion is a more explicit focus on materiality as a necessary condition for any religious experience (cf. McDannell 1995; Meyer and Houtman 2012; Morgan 1998). As de Vries points out, religion is predicated on a process of mediation, in the sense that the invisible and transcendent is made palpable and accessible to the human sensorium (de Vries 2001; cf. Van der Veer 1995). Following this line of reasoning, recent studies put a focus on the objects and materials that enable and shape religious practices, and thereby mediate believers’ experience of divine presence (Meyer 2006, 2009; Schulz 2008; Stolow 2010; Van de Port 2005, 2006; Vasquez 2011). Chidester (2005), Meyer (2012) and Schulz (2014, 2015) explicitly ask how a sense of authentic experience is generated through religious artifacts and practices, and emphasize the aesthetic dimension of the process. This perspective is relevant to our interest in the performance of heritage insofar as it highlights that the process by which people come to recognize something as authoritative or authentic operates not only through argument and explanation but also through – often synaesthetic – sensory perception and affective appeal.

Belonging, difference and *aisthesis*

Here we follow Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips, who have suggested that aesthetic should be understood less in the Kantian sense of ‘pure’ beauty to be ascertained in disinterested aesthetic judgment, and that pertains to the sphere of the arts. Instead, more attention should be paid to the Aristotelian sense of *aisthesis* as ‘our total sensory experience of the world and our sensitive knowledge of it’ (Meyer and Verrips 2008, 21). They proposed to conceive of aesthetics as sensorial and embodied styles with which people apprehend, express and (re)make the world through their bodies and all their senses: vision, hearing, touch, smell and taste (Meyer and Verrips 2008). Their conceptualization has become fruitful in perspectives on performance as essentially embodied symbolic enactment and interaction (Becker 2013; *passim*).

Significantly, it offers productive insights into the particular nature of practices and politics of making identity and difference. Recent new theorizing has once again critically taken on Benedict Anderson’s concept of ‘imagined communities’ (see also Askew 2002; Kaur 2005).

Meyer (2009) has suggested to replace Anderson's model of imagined communities with one of 'aesthetic formations'. Her undertaking to overcome the conceptual limitations of 'imagined community', while retaining Anderson's emphasis on media and mediation in the making of bonds, is particularly interesting because replacing community with formation emphasizes the 'making' of communities as a process. She points to the dual meaning of formation as both social entity and 'processes of forming [that] mold particular subjects through shared imaginations that materialize, ..., through *embodied aesthetic forms*' (Meyer 2009, 7; our emphasis).

The essays in this issue

A focus on the politics of embodied aesthetics, senses and affect is thus helpful for understanding the dynamics that become apparent in performance events such as those discussed in the contributions to this Special Issue. What the contributions suggest, then, is that an emphasis on aesthetics, the senses and affect sheds new light on the staging and experiencing of belonging and difference, and why performers and audiences alike experience them as 'real'.

The different contributions to this special issue also stress that in order to develop new directions in the study of identity, belonging and politics of difference, we need to take the connections of aesthetics and politics as a starting point. The articles investigate in diverse settings and types of action how we can through a focus on aesthetics approach diversity and the politics of difference and similarity in fresh ways.

Katrien Pype addresses social and symbolic differences in contemporary Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, as these are mediated via widely watched music television shows. The focus is on elderly people performing international and Congolese dance styles from the late colonial and early postcolonial periods. She demonstrates the production of intergenerational difference in the cultural domain, mediated through music. She argues that while the differences are situated at the level of morality and respectability, they are expressed in and via the body. In this way difference is expressed in the space of music, while at the same time there are articulations of conviviality among the generations, of shrinking social and generational distance. Pype's case study provides an intriguing dual perspective on the special issue's theme, performance and making and unmaking of difference. The 'urban elders' produce distance in relation to two distinct categories of social 'Others': contemporary youths, and the 'village elders'. Her discussion addresses generational as well as social and geographical difference. Such multiple forms of difference challenge the standard assumptions about ethnic and national forms of difference and belonging as being at the heart of African social formations.

Hauke Dorsch looks at performances of West African musicians in the diaspora in order to find out in which way artists consciously evoke feelings of home and address issues of belonging. He looks at both the visual and aural aspects of concerts, which, he argues, in the migrants' liminal life phase of staying abroad, serve as rituals of belonging to a more or less mythical home.

He links his observation of aesthetics and performance to a reflection of diaspora studies that have shown how inventions of ethnic identifications are often 'traditionalized' through being linked to a seemingly ancient homeland. His analysis of the continuity of the performance of a Mande and more precisely Mandinka identity thus relates difference and belonging more classically to ethnic identity. He however contests perspectives that have reduced music to some merely strategic means to an end, that is, the performance of the nation, power or ethnic identity.

In contrast to Dorsch's argument, Steve Akoth emphasizes the strategic use of cultural performance. He looks at how cultural festivals are used as both symbols and instruments for producing and claiming citizenship in Kenya. Akoth argues that the Obama K'Ogelo Cultural Festivals in western Kenya have been characterized by a desire to re-enact the authenticity of the 'Luo community'. He highlights both the significance of cultural performances in the process of 'becoming Luos', and the importance of aesthetic performance in formulating a conscious ethnic community 'beyond question'. Akoth maintains that the Luo people of K'Ogelo have used the festival performances to document their ethnographies as well as an instrument of positioning themselves in Kenya's body politic. Analytically he further contests explanations of performances as part of the quest for autochthony, as argued by Geschiere and Nyamnjoh (2000). Instead, he suggests, cultural festivals and related cultural performances should be seen as avenues through which local citizens make use of neoliberal language such as human rights, and seek to position themselves and make claims from the state as citizens of Kenya.

Unlike the other contributions that present cultural performances, which the researchers found 'out there', Ala Alhourani addresses the making and unmaking of difference through a methodological intervention of performative and sensory ethnography, which he embarked upon during his doctoral research with Somalis living in Cape Town. Although he describes specific events, which were set apart from daily life, he analytically highlights the conviviality of everyday multiculturalism and the shared sensory experience of living together. Alhourani's argument calls attention to ways in which identity politics of difference intersect, diverge and come together with the performance of convivial collective identity. The results of the performative ethnography were paradoxical; he argues that they can be read as destabilizing one another. While the first, a painting performance, evoked expressions of difference, the second, a performance of local carnival music and marching, involved performers and audience members of different cultural backgrounds in a collective convivial sensory experience. Both performances triggered conversations among a multicultural population through which people mediated their sense of difference and sameness.

The perspective of Nadine Sieveking's contribution deviates in a significant way from those of the other articles in this special issue; it also goes beyond various bodies of literature that have addressed performance, aesthetics and the senses. While the literature on cultural performance and belonging, despite different theoretical and methodological approaches, tends to analyse collective aspirations, she argues that her research on two contemporary women dancers from Senegal and Burkina Faso shows that with their work, the dancers are not performing the nation or a particular ethnicity. Instead, Sieveking claims, they stage their

individual identity as professional artists while using cultural and gendered difference as resources to position themselves in international art markets. Sieveking works with Mazzarella's (2004, 348) concept of 'the dialectical doubleness of mediation' to highlight their contention with the ideological frame of 'global art', which maintains that contemporary dance promotes norms of social and gender equality. Instead, she explains, 'in representing on stage the social conditions out of which their work has emerged, they potentially forge a career, thereby recursively remediating these social conditions' (Sieveking, 2017, 228).

Heike Becker's contribution finally addresses the role of cultural performance in contemporary global heritage and identity politics. Becker's analysis starts from Meyer's (2009) concept of aesthetic formations, which she expands through the notion of performance as sensorial enactment. This is done through an exemplary investigation of the aesthetics and politics of Afrikaaps, a production, which was performed by musicians and spoken-word artists from Cape Town. Ostensibly belonging to the contemporary genre of hip-hop – hardly a cultural form regarded as embodying cultural heritage – the performance mediates the bonding, the being and belonging to a linguistic-cultural 'community' and the post-apartheid nation through the performative mobilization of 'heritage'. The article highlights that the aesthetics and politics of Afrikaaps embrace both the making and unmaking of difference as the paradoxical foundations of belonging in post-apartheid South Africa. Becker thus presents an analysis of how visual and musical aesthetics converge in the performed production of history, as both creolization and ethnically specific heritage, and how the self-stylization is employed in asserting a cultural identity and political subjectivity.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all presenters, discussants and audience members at the panel, Un/making Difference through Performance and Mediation in Contemporary Africa, held at the European Conference on African Studies 2013 in Lisbon; special thanks are due, in addition to the authors of the Special Issue, to Julie Archambault, Karel Arnaut, Karin Barber, Cassis Killian and Matthias Krings. We express our sincere gratitude to Journal of African Cultural Studies editor Carli Coetzee for her enthusiasm and relentless support.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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