
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

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