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Introduction

“Power to the People?”—Patronage, Intervention and Transformation in African Performative Arts

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This volume is a culmination of conversations that started in 2017 between colleagues of Moi University and the University of Bayreuth. Needless to say, the history of that collaboration, which dates back more than two decades, has been productive in many respects, and it has been carried out specifically under the umbrella of the Institute for African Studies (IAS), University of Bayreuth, and of the School of Arts and Social Sciences, specifically the then Department of Literature, Theatre and Film Studies, Moi University. Our intention here is not to delve into that past of joint research, but to emphasize that this special issue is a product of intellectual engagements that have been on-going between the two institutions.

In May 2017, a first workshop on the topic of Performative Arts in Africa, organised by Marie-Anne Kohl, was held at the Institute of Music Theatre Studies (fimt) of the University of Bayreuth. Putting the discussion of concepts such as performance, mediality, participation, identity, representation, and power

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relations at center, the workshop aimed at the exploration of potential future collaborations. Christopher Odhiambo and Ricarda de Haas, both stimulating discussants of that meeting, became significant partners in this endeavor. Encouraged by likewise attendant then Dean of the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS) Dymitr Ibrizimow, they came up with the idea of a joint symposium on the subject to be held at Moi University. The BIGSAS alumni-meeting in June 2017 again sparked the idea to organise a profound follow-up of these meetings to achieve a thorough understanding of the cross-connections between different performative art forms in Africa. Thus, PI's, alumni and doctoral students of BIGSAS and its partner universities, like Mohammed v University of Rabat, Morocco, were invited to contribute their expertise.

The articles published in this volume are a selection of papers presented at the symposium that was held at Moi University between 20th and 25th March 2018. Themed “Power to the People? Patronage, Intervention and Transformation in African Performing Arts”, the symposium interrogated the following pertinent questions: Who performs what and for whom? Which intentions are behind performance? In which contexts does performance take place? And lastly, whose money is spent in these performances and who profits from them in which way? Regarding to performative arts in Africa and the African diaspora, these questions, which for the purpose of this publication were deliberately kept very open in their wording so as to encourage independent thought, address both the aesthetic and motivational specifics of different artistic performances as well as the relation of their protagonists, namely the actors, the audience and the donors, to one another. This means that the (pre-)conditions and necessities of artistic practices and the impact of economic realities play an important role for the kind of art that can happen, and how. Due to lack of institutional support, many African artists, musicians, and theatre practitioners depend on private sponsorship through businesses or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), who follow their own agendas, especially concerning the content and audiences to be reached. But also in the rare event of support through state agencies, artistic processes are enmeshed in intricate power relations. Artists time and again prove to have gained special competences in navigating these complicated interdependencies.¹

1 A useful framework for the analysis of the specificities of business investment in the arts has been provided by Roberta Comunian, “Towards a new Conceptual Framework for Business Investments in the Arts: Some Examples from Italy,” *The Journal of Arts Management Law and Society* (October 2009).

The articles in this special issue demonstrate that there is a sense of mutual dependence of performative arts and patronage. We explicitly point at the two-fold significance of patronage, one of which lies in the meaning of patronage as an economic reality, the other as a transformative intervention in life realities. Odhiambo fittingly describes this double entendre—financial funding is needed while at the same time it will possibly compromise the enterprise—as a paradox.² In this volume, Christopher Odhiambo argues for a critical examination of the film *Ni Sisi's* conveyed ideology in relation to its main sponsor's interests, as does Marie-Anne Kohl in regard to the (im)possibilities of an effective critique of the main sponsors of West African talent shows. Driss and Farouk El Maarouf discuss the relation of artists and the state as sponsor as one between control, observation and enabling. In Yvette Ngum's example, institutional support is simply a tool to enable a theatre production which copes with trauma. Peptual Mforbe highlights the relation of artists and patrons in the context of theatre, and critically examines the impact of the financial patronage provided by institutions and organisations. Similarly, Tom Mboya analyses the power relations between the audience as patron and the musician as client in Eldoret town, and identifies patronage as a source for social meaning of the musical performance. Otherwise, Annachiara Raia discusses patronage as a complicated complex of ownership, copyright, commission, compensation and labour in the context of Swahili classical *tendi* and *mashairi* songs in Western Kenya. Also Clarissa Vierke focusses on patronage in literature, and describes historical and political changes of this relationship in Dar es Salaam from an ideological to a commercial one. In his article, Samuel Ndogo demonstrates that there exists a symbiotic relationship between sponsoring corporate institutions and the theatre production companies in Nairobi, which is of mutual benefit to both parties. As such, by sponsoring the theatre productions, media houses are able to advertise their products, while the theatre production companies get the opportunity to announce upcoming performances to wider audiences.

The other concept that the papers in this volume examine is that of transformation. Apart from side effects of patronage, where the transformation of political and social life sometimes is explicitly intended and as such supported by donors, the authors illustrate the transformative power of performances as well as its limitations. This is well articulated in Odhiambo's reading of the Film *Ni Sisi* and the perceived implications of sponsored art in this volume. With

2 Christopher Odhiambo, "Intervention Theatre Traditions in East Africa and the Paradox of Patronage," in *Rethinking Eastern African Literary and Intellectual Landscapes*, ed. James Oguide, Grace Musila & Dina Ligaga (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2012): 59.

her autoethnographic and director's perspective on the transformative power of performance, Yvette Ngum concerns herself with the potential of healing by addressing trauma. Driss and Farouk El Maarouf show how the artistic engagement with the city wall may transform its meanings between politics and poetics. Elsewhere, Odhiambo links the aspect of transformation to Wole Soyinka's interpretation of ritual performance which "effects transformation in the participants"—the actors and the audience alike, the community.³ As a key characteristic of performance itself, transformation is furthermore vital to theories of the performative. Linked to aspects like 'processuality' and 'co-presence of actors and audience' (Fischer-Lichte),⁴ the moment of the performance itself can be understood as the core element and analytical object of performative arts. We hence see in the close investigation of artistic performances the big potential to gain knowledge about the (transforming) relations of aesthetics, motivation and protagonists. For instance, in her close reading of the performance of a Senegalese dance group at the talent show *L'Afrique a un incroyable talent*, Marie-Anne Kohl confronts the (im)possibilities of aesthetic and structural, socio-political transformation with one another. The perspective of performativity in this volume is hence key to the concept of transformation through performance.

By bringing performative arts in Africa and the African diaspora to the fore, what the contributors of this volume have done is to analyse the various performative arts, namely, music, theatre, dance, performance poetry, stage drama, street art, and film, thus offering a multiplicity of approaches to these practices. For instance, theatre as well as performance poetry events often feature different genres and subgenres on the same stage, and borrow "from various disciplines ranging from the performing and visual arts to music, literature, and orality" as well as fine arts and new media technologies.⁵ Also, the audience that is key to any performative act often may be best described as a community, and it is, therefore, "the community's grievances or feelings" that are addressed, and performers may be expected to act as a "mouthpiece of the community".⁶ Yet, recent productions suggest a shift towards more experimental forms, and therefore opened up for new debates. They are also characterised

3 Christopher Odhiambo, "Intervention Theatre Traditions in East Africa and the Paradox of Patronage," 62.

4 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (New York, London: Routledge, 2008): 38f.

5 Pamela Dube, *Contemporary English Performance Poetry in Canada and South Africa: A Comparative Study of the Main Motifs and Poetic Techniques* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter GmbH, 1997): 38.

6 Pamela Dube, *Contemporary English Performance Poetry*: 40.

by transcultural rhizomatic structures that function across geography rather than monolocally and monolithically, especially when merging old media such as live performances with new media such as video recordings or social media tools.⁷ Thus, interactions are at the same time individual and collective, local and global, they relate to both revered oral traditions and popular cultures, and in doing so, African performances transcend these dualities.⁸ In her respective contribution, Vierke discusses performances by a group of poets, the Lumpendichter (paltry poets) from Dar es Salaam, arguing that their art can be considered subversive, yet at the same time they sometimes perform in praise of the ruling class for monetary gain or expecting recognition through literary awards.

In regard to the idea of patronage, many artists reflect the contexts they work in critically, especially in terms of post-colonial asymmetrical power relations, for instance in form of the interventions of NGOs, but also in terms of state censorship, commercial mainstream or global agents of culture. Alternative projects do exist, like *Kwani?* in Kenya or *Word n Sound* in Johannesburg, whose work is more autonomous in terms of content and financing.⁹ When it comes to asymmetrical power relations, other aspects are at stake. For example, categories like gender and age can be further complicated through the intervention of patronage. On the one hand, patronage might cement existing gender and age relations. On the other hand, the agenda of many NGOs often aims at transforming those relations and give a voice to marginalized groups. Pepetual Mforbe broaches these issues in her contribution by discussing two performances commissioned by the Fobang-Mundi Foundation and The Society for Women and AIDS Africa-Cameroon (SWAA-C). However, those voices might not be accepted by the community, which again bears questions about the legitimacy and effectiveness of those interventions. Also, NGOs often focus on their own socio-political agendas rather than on aesthetics or on forms that seek to innovate the arts.¹⁰ Odhiambo's article reveals this dichotomy as NGO agenda mainly privileges the message in the process of intervention.

7 Ricarda de Haas, *Spoken Word Goes Digital: Performance Poetry und Social Media in Harare und Johannesburg*. (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2018): 43–47.

8 Ricarda de Haas, *Spoken Word Goes Digital*: 40.

9 For a detailed analyses of *Kwani?* see Doreen Strauhs, *African Literary NGOs: Power, Politics, and Participation*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). An analysis of *Word n Sound* has been done by Ricarda de Haas, "African or Virtual, Popular or Poetry: The Spoken Word Platform Word N Sound Series" in *Popular Postcolonialisms: Discourses of Empire and Popular Culture*, eds Nadia Atia and Kate Houlden, (New York, London: Routledge, 2017): 238–252.

10 Julius Heinicke, *How to Cook a Country: Theater in Zimbabwe im politisch-ästhetischen Spannungsfeld*. (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013): 49f.

However, while intervention theatre addresses issues of various insecurities, the precariousness of the genre and its actors themselves are at stake. For they generally do not act out of an autonomous position. Rather, on the one hand, actors chose an employment that is not only precarious, but which they might have to defend as a “‘not not’ work of theatre”¹¹—although, as Jenny Mbaye shows, “evolving in precarious and insecure careers historically is a common practice”¹² at least for West African societies. On the other hand, the necessity of financing intervention theatre brings the project in dependence of donors. While Odhiambo shows that such dependences were already prevalent in pre-colonial times, he also points to a new severity of this relation in colonial and post-colonial contexts, to a point where the “relationship between intervention theatre practitioners and their sponsors, in a sense, is a reflection of the unequal relationship between the poor South and donors from the developed North.”¹³

One overarching concern of the contributions in this volume is that they provide a profound and nuanced understanding on patronage and intervention from the realm of intervention theatre to a wider range of performative arts, such as performance poetry or street art. In different ways, these contributions address the following pertinent questions: What are the economic conditions and socio-political contexts of performance in Africa and the African diaspora? How do artists react to that? What kind of artistic interventions take place? Who is the performer, who is the addressee, and who is financing the performance? What are the effects as well as the goals of donors’ agendas, how are they tried to be implemented, who is speaking for whom? How do alternative networks function? Do those projects succeed, and which models of finance and organizational structures are behind that? Which role does media play—and what kind of media does play a role—in implementing, disseminating or undermining and subverting those agendas of transformation? Which realms of precariousness are addressed, which are not?

All contributions compiled in this special issue focus on specific forms of performance in relation to the issues of patronage, transformation and inter-

11 Nicholas Ridout & Rebecca Schneider, “Precarity and Performance: An Introduction,” in *TDR/The Drama Review* 56.4 (2012): 5–9.

12 Jenny Mbaye, “On the rogue practices of West African musical entrepreneurs,” in *Rogue urbanism. Emergent African cities*, ed. Edgar Pieterse & Abdou Maliq Simone (Johannesburg: Jacana Media and African Centre for Cities, 2013): 257.

13 Christopher J. Odhiambo, “Intervention Theatre Traditions in East Africa and the Paradox of Patronage,” 72.

vention. In order to frame the arguments, we organised this volume into five thematic sections:

In the section “Urban Space”, the texts by Samuel Ndogo and Driss and Farouk El Maarouf address artistic modes of dealing with specific aspects of city life. In his article, Ndogo analyses three Gĩkũyũ comedies namely *Nyoori Momori*, *Tũirio Twega* and *Itina Sacco* as possible sites for employment of vernacular plays to critique unpopular government policies, using Bakhtin’s ‘theory of the body’. He asserts that though the popularity of vernacular language performances in Kenya is driven by their thematic relevance to the common people’s tribulations, and sustained by libidinous metaphors and sexual innuendos, they nevertheless can seriously be considered as subversive and aesthetic means of political critique. Ndogo argues that these farcical plays use ‘play of words’, puns and witticisms to anchor marriage as an avenue through which a wide range of socio-political issues are explored, concluding that domestic affairs, relationships and infidelity are employed as commentary on contemporary political issues.

In their analysis of the Jidar street art festival of Rabat, Morocco, Driss El Maarouf and Farouk El Maarouf recognize the intersections of diverse artistic concepts (festival, paint, street art, wall, patronage, cooptation, resistance, local and global) as embedded in politics of possession. Thus, they ‘read’ city walls as serving a threefold purpose: they provide the architecture that frames up the city, they function as canvases for street artists, and they are a symbol for a desire to mark and to own territories. Consequently, Driss and Farouk El Maarouf develop the intriguing concept of artistic appropriation of city walls as being both a piece of art—an object that invites or pleases the visitors’ gaze—and a political statement, for the very act of reclaiming the wall as canvas challenges the idea of possession. Moreover, as the Jidar street art festival operates under the framework of state-patronage and private sponsorship, street artists find themselves within the paradox that they have to respect certain formalities while they simultaneously enjoy the freedom to showcase their art officially. The festival eventually leads to an aesthetical as well as a socio-economic transformation of the city as the urban space gradually transcends into a public workstation, a ‘macro-atelier’, as the El Maaroufs coined it.

“Violence, Economic Influence and Aesthetics of Framing” is a section in which articles from Christopher Odhiambo and Yvette Ngum look into how funding, sponsor and audience influence aesthetics and messaging in intervention performance initiatives. In his paper, Odhiambo explores the paradox in the symbiotic relationship between artists and their sponsors/patrons using as an example the intervention community theatre initiative of Sponsored Arts For Education in Kenya (S.A.F.E-K)’s film, *Ni Sisi*, which was originally a stage

play portraying the 2007/2008 post-election violence in Kenya, but was later sponsored and upgraded into a film to be shown for free throughout Kenya. His compelling argument is that the ideology and the messages as framed, circulated and conveyed by *Ni Sisi* (Kiswahili for ‘It is us’—the people) on Kenya’s 2007/2008 post-election violence was immensely influenced by the commercial and publicity interests of its main sponsor—the giant Telco firm Safaricom Kenya Limited. The article further explores the history of patronage and the arts from the Renaissance period to the present, then zeroes in on interventionist art (Theatre for Community Development/Theatre in Education), where, because it is offered for free to the audience, a patron can influence how it is created, its composition and construction, and with the final outcome being predetermined and agreed upon. Odhiambo’s analysis points out that patronage is deliberate for decorative purposes, as marketing/branding strategies, as a means of creating positive public opinion, as an investment opportunity, and even purely as a means of entrenching culture within a community.

The central issue of Yvette Ngum’s autoethnographic account is coping with trauma through performance. She closely describes the production processes and audience’s response to the theatre performance “Tears in a Mirror” that she wrote and directed, based on sexual violence, in order to define the self-empowering, transformative potential of performative art. In her paper she introduces her autoethnographic performance method which implements a circular application of observation, taking notes, discussions and critical reflection, and thereby points out the processuality of doing autoethnography. The impact of the sponsoring organisation for enabling the performance becomes evident in form of the critically, socially engaged department Drama of Life at the University of Witwatersrand. It not only provided financial, but also technical, practical and intellectual support and thus somehow offered a safer frame for the performance’s implementation as well as for its specific aesthetics. However, rather than on patronage, Ngum’s focus is on the perceived transformative power of performance when relating to an experienced reality, to evoke consciousness and understanding.

The section “Subaltern and Subversive Voices” comprises the contributions by Clarissa Vierke and Pepetual Mforbe, which address the complex relationalities of a commissioned piece of literature and theatre, as well as its (im)possibilities to speak to specific aspects. In her article, Clarissa Vierke introduces the *Lumpendichter* (paltry poets in English) from Dar es Salaam, whose reputation due to their precarious economic situation, their use of popular forms as well as their attitude of being both critical voices and praising poets may be best described as ambivalent. In this context, patronage is contested as offi-

cial praise poetry of the state and the party, while it generates income and sometimes even literary prizes, is regarded to carry little artistic value, at least according to the standards set by academic poets and scholars. Questioning these ideological dichotomies, the paper criticises previous scholarship in cultural and literary studies and bangs the drum for subtle analyses of poetic forms that thrive besides the known tracks. By concentrating on a female poet, Bi Jalala, with whom Vierke has had many conversations about her poetry and about her harsh life, Vierke analyses the various roles Bi Jalala deliberately fulfils to both survive and to get recognized as a poet.

In her paper, Pepetual Mforbe Chiangong investigates the quality of the collaborations between donors and theatre makers. By focusing on two performances, namely *The Boomerang* and *Pamela's Journal*, sponsored by the *Fobang-Mundi Foundation* as well as *The Society for Women and AIDS Africa-Cameroon (SWAA-C)*, the article analyses the role of donor agencies that finance theatre productions in Africa. By taking the disadvantages of patronage into account, Mforbe asks whether these endeavours actually give power to the people, or who benefits most from them. However, the main interest of the article is to highlight theatrical techniques that theatre directors and facilitators could employ to dismantle dichotomous relations between the donor agencies on one side and theatre projects on the other.

The texts by Annachiara Raia and Marie-Anne Kohl in the section “Commodification of Art” tackle the complex relation of sponsorship, ownership, aesthetic form and critical stance. Focusing on three performative dimensions of classical Swahili song in her paper, Annachiara Raia discusses the complicated relationality between author, sponsor, text, audience, performance and repetition. Based on recorded versions of classical 19th-century *tendi* poems and contemporary compositions, which have been archived on CD and VHS, Raia concentrates on the intersections of traditional and contemporary, oral and written Swahili poetry—in the *utendi* and *mashairi* forms—and on the role technology plays in the process of how those performances are displayed and preserved. Analysing the discursive network of artists—the composer (*mtungaji*), reader (*msomaji*), and singer (*mwimbaji*)—on basis of interviews and conversations Raia conducted in the city of Mombasa Old Town and the islands of Lamu, Pate and Siu in Eastern Kenya, she reveals the complexity of patronage. Raia specifically addresses the blurring of boundaries as property and authorship become intertwined, for example when a commissioned work for a wedding or funeral becomes the property of the patron, or when an author asks a renowned singer to take his composition and make it more popular.

Marie-Anne Kohl links her analyses of a global talent show format being localised in Western francophone Africa to a critique of state and corporate

engagement in promoting artists. With the thematisation of the economic conditions and socio-political contexts of *L'Afrique a un incroyable talent*, she questions the effects and goals of the donors' agendas. Her paper thus contributes to a broader discussion of the relation between TV talent shows and patronage. By closely reading and historically contextualising the *mbalax* performance of a competing Senegalese dance group for her music and performance analyses, Kohl broaches the issue of performance's potential to spark aesthetic and socio-political transformation. Her analyses meets a desideratum of rare research on African TV talent show adaptations and addresses the Global North-South relation within the transnational TV format trade as well as Global South-South relations within its implementation.

The section "Processualities of Production" brings together the contributions by Fredrick Mbogo and Tom Mboya, which address the interdependence of the performers and the audience, the artists and the patrons.

Mbogo's article is a comparative reading of the dialogue of the main characters in two plays—John-Sibi Okumu's *Role Play* and Francis Imbuga's *Betrayal in the City*. The main premise is that the two playwrights belong to a particular (middle) class in society, and are therefore beholden to them as special patrons. They are patrons because they have certain peculiar expectations that follow the beaten tracks the playwrights have created for themselves, and the playwrights consciously struggle to measure up to these expectations. These two writers have deliberately specialized in plays that are political in nature, that use a particular language, and that are staged in high end theatre spaces: Imbuga's target being mainly the University community, and Sibi-Okumu's expatriates and the literati. What is common in Mbogo's and Ndogo's articles is that the theatrical performances they analyse target urban middle class audiences. The main argument in Mbogo's article is that the two plays are accurate predictions of a political trend in Kenya, where characters suffer with stoicism as their political masters hurt them for sport; where, in the Epictetus fashion, the masses do nothing about their intimate knowledge of the oncoming doom, apart from merely noting (with a tired sigh of resignation) its tragic arrival.

The intimate relationship between the audience and the artiste is further explored by Mboya who interrogates the practice of gifts exchange between musicians and members of their audience (the asymmetry inscribed in the patron-client paradigm). Using the example of Ja-Mnazi Afrika's 'live band' performances at the Noble Hotel in Eldoret town, Mboya argues that contrary to popular belief, this relationship is not always hierarchical, but, as in this particular case, symmetrical and symbiotic, where both parties embody and enact power, thereby constructing a sense of the value of their lives. Using Michel Foucault's theory of power, which argues that power is diffused rather

than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive; Mboya investigates in this particular context who's will, between that of the patron (audience) and the artiste (musicians) gets done when art is made. Additionally, Mboya explores the system of differentiations, types of objectives, instrumental modes, forms of institutionalization and degrees of rationalization to demonstrate how power is elaborated, transformed, and organized: and how it endows itself with processes that are more or less adjusted to the situation—which in this case—is a level playing field.

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