



Performing Africa

Paulla A. Ebron

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The *jali*--a member of a hereditary group of Mandinka professional performers--is a charismatic but contradictory figure. He is at once the repository of his people's history, the voice of contemporary political authority, the inspiration for African American dreams of an African homeland, and the chief entertainment for the burgeoning transnational tourist industry. Numerous journalists, scholars, politicians, and culture aficionados have tried to pin him down. This book shows how the jali's talents at performance make him a genius at representation--the ideal figure to tell us about the "Africa" that the world imagines, which is always a thing of illusion, magic, and contradiction.

Africa often enters the global imagination through news accounts of ethnic war, famine, and despotic political regimes. Those interested in countering such dystopic images--be they cultural nationalists in the African diaspora or connoisseurs of "global culture"--often found their representations of an emancipatory Africa on an enthusiasm for West African popular culture and performance arts. Based on extensive field research in The Gambia and focusing on the figure of the jali, *Performing Africa* interrogates these representations together with their cultural and political implications. It explores how Africa is produced, circulated, and consumed through performance and how encounters through performance create the place of Africa in the world. Innovative and discerning, *Performing Africa* is a provocative contribution to debates over cultural nationalism and the construction of identity and history in Africa and elsewhere.

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