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Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, Johanna Siméant

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in - Smith, 2005, 2009, 2011  
Hardshell on WSF Activism.  
Boulder = Paradigm, 2011.

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## CHAPTER 12

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### AFRICAN VOICES AND ACTIVISTS AT THE WSF IN NAIROBI:

#### THE UNCERTAIN WAYS OF TRANSNATIONAL AFRICAN ACTIVISM

*Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle and Johanna Siméant*

A rich literature has developed on World Social Forums (WSFs), regional Social Forums, and other transnational contentious gatherings. Scholars have carried out surveys on their composition and participation (Agrikoliansky and Sommer 2005; della Porta and Tarrow 2005c; Reese et al., Chapter 4). But few studies have addressed what is at stake with the localization, both geographic and symbolic, of the World Social Forums. Why observe this WSF in particular? First of all, even if the other WSFs also took place in the South, the 2007 WSF was the first World Forum held in Africa, if one excludes the polycentric Social Forum of January 2006, held in Bamako, Karachi, and Caracas. The organizers of this Forum were not unaware of the stakes in making African voices heard in the WSF process, especially since Africa is perceived as the continent most victimized by globalization. Reflecting on Africa at the WSF in Nairobi means at the same time thinking about the emergence of an African alter-globalism,<sup>1</sup> incarnated *inter alia* by the African Social Forum (ASF). It also

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implies reflections on the diversity of transnationalized African networks (both in organizational and ideological terms), on the tensions between the latter, and on the complex relationship they have to Northern and other Southern (such as Asia and Latin America) activists. The African alterglobal movement, if anything, is a field of multiple tensions.

To observe the World Social Forum in Nairobi from the point of view of the South—in particular Africa—is thus a means of addressing some of the shortcomings of the sociology of transnational social movements. Despite some exceptions (Wood 2005; Rothman and Oliver 1999), today these are mainly centered on Western civil societies, or, at best, on transnational campaigns concerning the South (dams, child labor, debt), but mainly animated by Northern activists. Transnational militancy of the South is generally considered through its adaptation and appropriation of external dynamics (Bob 2002; Wing 2002). Binary explanations of this activism (seen either as an emergent *sui generis* civil society, or as the “compradors”<sup>2</sup> of an ever-patronizing North) are not satisfying. This is why we would like to show how African activists participated in the WSF in Nairobi and what the conflicts are around the right to talk about, for, and from Africa.

These questions are linked. In an alterglobal space that often overlooks or downplays them, it is important here to think about the hierarchies, the conflicts, or even quite simply the division of labor within transnational activism. That presupposes attention to the social and material conditions of activism. Agency, identity, injustice (Gamson 1992), the three central components of collective action, do not rest only on intentional and strategic use of symbols. The manipulation of symbols is always deeply rooted in social settings. A robust materialism is what allows, by pointing to the constraints of collective action in a transnational setting marked by huge divides in terms of resources, to understand what is at stake in ideological constructions that try to denounce injustices or to build bridges between African activists themselves, or between them and other transnational activists.

In order to combine an analysis of the social conditions and the symbolic work of protest in this Forum in Africa, this chapter is divided into two parts. The first one focuses on the material conditions of attendance at the WSF and how they were translated into debates about the representativeness of this Forum. The second part examines how identities and claims to speak in the name of Africa were constrained by this space of tensions.<sup>3</sup>

## WHOSE FORUM? DEBATES AND TENSIONS ABOUT AFRICAN ATTENDANCE AT THE WSF

In October 2006, only 8 percent of the members of the International Committee of the WSF represented an organization whose headquarters were in Africa.<sup>4</sup> Involving African delegates in the WSF was thus considered a necessity for the Forum to be seen as a true worldwide initiative. Nairobi was, therefore, chosen to host the seventh Forum from January 20–24, 2007. But the geographical localization of the Forum was not enough to certify that the event was fully African. Debates arose about its representativeness, and tensions were visible inside the space of African internationalized activism.

The figures for African attendance at the Forum, as well as the relationships of African groups and delegates to external actors, were at the center of debates during and after the event. Those numbers must be used with some caution as should any self-quantification of political activity. Indeed, these figures were crucial to measure and show evidence of the vibrancy and representativeness of the Forum. However, even the most quoted of the official figures was probably overestimated and claimed 45,000 registered participants—far smaller than the 100,000 participants initially expected, or in comparison to the previous Forum in Porto Alegre (Organizing Committee of World Social Forum 2007).<sup>5</sup> The official figures, however, do indicate that African delegates were a majority, or at least that it was the greatest participation of African activists since the WSF’s inception. Indeed there were approximately 30 Africans in 2001 in Porto Alegre, 200 in 2002, and a bit more in 2003. These numbers are equivalent to the attendance at the African Social Forum (200 African delegates in Bamako in 2002, in Addis Ababa in 2004, and between 300 and 650 in Lusaka in 2004). By contrast, in Nairobi there were between 400 and 1,000 Tanzanian delegates, between 50 and 120 from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, between 25 and 50 Malians, more than 200 Senegalese, 150 Sudanese, 360 South African, and the same number of Ugandan delegates.<sup>6</sup> African delegates in Nairobi were more than mere participants; a good number came to make presentations in one or more panels. Among the 130 panels observed by our team that were directly linked to African themes or organizations,<sup>7</sup> African speakers represented more than a quarter of the speakers in the majority of cases. A bit less than a third of the panels had a majority of African speakers. Only a dozen panels included less

than a quarter African speakers. The participation and contribution of African delegates in the first WSF held in Africa was therefore much more than symbolic, and clearly far greater than in any previous WSF.

The participation of Kenyan people in the Forum was at the core of several controversies before,<sup>8</sup> during, and after the Forum. It is reported that the participation of Kenyans was lower than the attendance of nationals from India or Brazil (CRID 2007), even if Kenyan delegates made up 90 percent of African delegates (Organizing Committee of World Social Forum 2007). The main reason said to account for this was the entry fee, which first amounted to 500 Kenyan shillings (\$7 U.S. dollars) and dropped to 50 Kenyan shillings (\$0.75 U.S. dollars) after protests were addressed to the local committee. In spite of this, a few groups of Kenyan, French, South African, and Japanese activists expressed their discontent by forcing open the gates of the stadium and demanding free entry for everyone. The reality of this financial constraint was never contested but some regular participants to the Forum and the local organizers claimed afterwards that it had never been easy to facilitate the participation of the poorest. Churches as well as ecumenical networks were the only ones able to massively mobilize people from the slums as they serve as intermediaries between them and Kenyan NGOs connected to international networks (Orvis 2003).

The most destitute were not the only ones to have been mobilized and subsidized to participate in the Forum. All African delegates from outside Kenya interviewed by our team were sponsored by Northern organizations that paid for their plane tickets and their stay in Nairobi. The Centre de recherche et d'informations pour le développement (CRID), a French NGO network, sponsored 47 partners including 19 African delegates with funding from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Other organizations—including the German faith-based NGO Evangelische Entwicklungsdienst (EED), national delegations of Caritas Internationalis, Action Aid, Oxfam, and of the Red Cross, Brot für die Welt, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, the Confédération générale du travail (CGT, a French trade union) as well as smaller groups representing Via Campesina or the Comité pour l'annulation de la Dette du Tiers Monde (CADTM)—provided subsidies to support participation by Southern partners. This external patronage has been in place since the beginning of the involvement of African delegates in the process of the WSF (Sulmont 2004).<sup>9</sup>

Northern NGOs and donors subsidized participation of African delegates for different reasons, one of them being to strengthen their

relationships with their partner organizations, in contrast to the idea promoted by the Forum itself that it is an arena of equal exchanges. For instance, a panel on water issues was organized and attended by Italian and Kenyan activists who had been in contact for a long time, and the aim seemed to have been to maintain these privileged relationships more than to create new ones. Other panels were opportunities for Northern NGOs to look for new partners and projects to subsidize, and to expose and publicize the projects of their Southern counterparts. For instance, in the case of an African women's rights NGO, the organization reported on their activities in a seminar during the Forum before presenting them to their donor, which had organized a meeting after the Forum to review their grant proposals.

In spite of this financial link, Northern delegates refused to talk about patronage. A lot of them claimed that a new kind of relationship had arisen in the alterglobal movement where North-South relationships have changed radically. Gus Massiah, one of the French founders of the WSF, claimed on several occasions in Nairobi that it was necessary "to stop saying we helped our Southern partners to come. We should overcome this North-South relationship to create a shared global project" (CRID 2007). In spite of this reminder, the dependency of African delegates on the good will of their Northern counterparts was overtly criticized because it reportedly reproduced an imperialist domination (Abdul-Raheem 2007). Other African delegates did, however, ask for the intervention of Northern donors, as it was their only way to attend these international meetings. Some African delegates were able to use this material dependency to their advantage. For instance, some were so well connected to Northern donors that they were granted significant funding to attend the WSF, and gave their surplus grants to finance less well-connected activists. The autonomy of African alterglobal activists was often emphasized in panels where African and Southern audiences were in the majority, claiming that they "wouldn't be domesticated by NGOs," since many NGOs were funded by Northern governments or sometimes international financial institutions. In one of these sessions a South African participant warned, "We should be suspicious of our donors and what they are expecting from us."<sup>10</sup> The material divide between alterglobal actors leads to an international division of activist work, and not only material, but also symbolic, conflicts (on who is legitimate and has the right to talk) between Northern and Southern actors. But divisions also occur inside the internationalized space of African activism.

*INTERNATIONALIZED AFRICAN ACTIVISM AS A SPACE OF TENSIONS*

The international division of activist work in Africa creates tensions that are masked or reflected in ideological oppositions. Divisions about reformist/radical approaches or about the relationships of the African alterglobal movement to African governments and international financial institutions are also a reflection of social divides along linguistic and regional lines and differing histories of cooperation. These cleavages were put aside and even denied by African delegates who saw the focus on cleavages as a misconception or a cliché perpetuated by Northern observers.

The first edition of the African Social Forum was held in January 2002 in Bamako. It was born out of a will of African movements to promote African participation in the WSF and to bypass European initiatives, which also attempted to organize African participation in the WSF. The ASF nevertheless benefitted from the beginning from support from the French civil society and the French state department for development, now part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Two West African activists, Taoufik Ben Abdallah and Aminata Traoré, both very well connected to transnational networks, were key in helping attract international support for the ASF (Sulmont 2004). Opening up gradually beyond its West African members, the council of the ASF was created in 2004 and is made up of more than 40 African organizations from all over the continent.

However, critics from inside and outside the ASF have never disappeared. They blame the ASF for maintaining relationships with African governments and intergovernmental organizations like the African Union (Sulmont 2004). Another cleavage draws a line between those who want to anchor the ASF in community and mass movements and the promoters of the ASF who have come from NGOs (Hlatshwayo 2004). Another common cleavage in the alterglobal space divides the ASF between those who consider the WSF as a "space" and those who see it as a "movement" (Van der Wekken 2005). The former favor debates and exchanges while the latter hopes to unite activist groups in a common struggle (Ngwane 2007). These multiple tensions are signs of struggle between diverse networks and traditions of mobilization, notably (but not only) between some francophone activists, who were early leaders of the ASF, and South African activists who were not involved from the beginning. This might have been caused by a lack of relationships between different parts of the African continent but also by the desire of European and Brazilian founders of the WSF not to involve white

English-speaking, Anglo-Saxon NGOs and, consequently, their perceived "Southern" partners like South African organizations (Sulmont 2004), even if the latter have a strong radical tradition.

South African activists have been integrated into the ASF with some reluctance also because there were fears that they wanted to dominate the African alterglobal movement.<sup>11</sup> Their activist know-how as well as their radicalism, both inherited from the struggle against Apartheid and renewed in the protests against the neoliberal policies of the Mbeki government, were visible during the WSF in Nairobi. They took part in the protests against the entry fees, they were among the few African delegates involved in the social movements assembly, and they were noticeable in some panels where they expressed their radical and experienced approach to activism by raising their fist when talking, using anti-Apartheid slogans like *Amandla*, and speaking to other delegates as "comrades." South African activists were perceived by many of their African counterparts as having hegemonic ambitions, mirroring the South African state's strong pretention to diplomatically speak for Africa. Nevertheless, important internal divisions exist among South African activists. There is indeed a strong divide between, on the one hand, mass and community movements like the ones fighting against privatization of water and electricity, some of whom are Trotskyist, and on the other hand NGOs organizing international campaigns like the Treatment Action campaign to expand HIV/AIDS patients' access to health care, the success of which reinforced South Africa's reputation for activist mobilization (Zuern 2006).<sup>12</sup> These national divisions thus make it impossible to generalize about the South African activist space, which is itself divided along the NGOs versus social movements line, as is the WSF itself.

A sociological analysis might question this conventional distinction between NGOs (not all are well funded, exclusive, or driven by Northern agendas) and social movements (not all are grassroots or conforming to the participatory ideals and egalitarianism often proclaimed by participants), but when mentioned during interviews this distinction made sense to African alterglobal activists. Nongovernmental organizations, which were described as formally structured, dependent on external funding, exclusive, and led by reformist intellectuals, were seen to contrast with social movements, including trade unions, and grassroots groups, which were said to better reflect popular demands and to aim to radically change the social and political order.

In Nairobi, the divide was also clearly displayed when activists demonstrated at the offices of the local organizing committee, using the classic repertoire of social movements to express their discontent with the entry fees. The strength of this division in Nairobi can be linked to the intensity of this tension inside the African alterglobal movement. While the declaration of the ASF insisted on the necessity of building the ASF from “grassroots social movements,” some African commentators regretted that, despite these aspirations, NGOs’ financial superiority gave them disproportionate influence in the ASF process as well as in the Nairobi WSF. If in Latin America, in particular, there is a strong critique of the “NGO-ification” of social movements, based on the idea that NGOs tend to depoliticize critiques of society, this hegemonic position of NGOs in the alterglobal movement, and in Nairobi, should be considered in light of recent African social history. “Civil society” organizations and notably NGOs have been flourishing since the 1980s because of international support, as well as internal democratic protests and weaknesses of the state (Igoe and Kelsall 2005). The NGOs took over from trade unions, which were indeed moribund (except perhaps in Southern Africa), because of one-party regimes and structural changes in economies. After offering themselves as partners to the state and to external donors, NGOs became targets of critics and tried to find new sources of legitimacy by working with community-based organizations.

African trade unions came back onto the alterglobal scene during the WSF in Nairobi. This new process of internationalization of trade unions as well as their tendency to import NGOs’ “know-how” testified that they were now part of the alterglobal movement. It also showed that cleavages between NGOs and social movements were less clear than they seemed to be in past delegates’ discourses. It was also apparent that trade unions were also divided over radical and reformist goals. The “social movements” side of the WSF was actually still dominated by non-African activists, as was shown during the Assembly of Social Movements.<sup>13</sup> To counterbalance this absence, African activists and especially women were encouraged to come and talk during the Assembly, where every organization could make a declaration and propose a protest activity.

This ongoing opposition between NGOs and social movements has also led to changes, especially in the way organizations express their representativeness. Whereas those who claimed to be social movements blamed NGOs for being too distant from the people they are working for,

these very critics have been largely assimilated by the NGOs that invited spokespersons from the “grassroots” to make presentations during the WSF. This was especially the case with the “Human Dignity and Human Rights Caucus,” which held dozens of seminars where professional activists and “people from the ground,” as they were introduced, shared the stage. During a panel on “Economic and Social Human Rights,” a young woman introduced as Marcy told the story of her life in the Kibera slum.<sup>14</sup> Her tricky position as an intermediary between NGOs and the community was brought to light when young men in the audience denounced NGOs as using communities for their own purposes. Marcy did defend NGOs, while at the same time admitting that in the past they may have been “using ordinary people.” As a spokesperson she had to adjust her answer to suit both the people she was supposed to be representing (i.e., slum dwellers) and the NGOs who had given her the opportunity to be considered as the representative of her community.

#### WHOSE VOICES? SPEAKING IN THE NAME OF AFRICA—DOUBLE BINDS AND CENSORSHIPS

This Forum, more than others, was an opportunity to observe how activists from Africa and the rest of the world speak about Africa in an international movement event. This helps us to understand the difficulties faced by all movements that intend to denounce domination and at the same time be capable of agency (Gamson 1992), as well as the constraints faced by internationalized actors who claim to represent their national or local constituencies. The current situation in Africa seemed obvious proof of the misdeeds of globalization and capitalism. But mobilizing in the name of Africa did not go without constraints or even double binds.

#### AGENCY AND DOMINATION

The classic double bind for social movements is to, on the one hand, be able to criticize situations of misery without falling into pessimism or impotence, and, on the other hand, to celebrate agency without ignoring real difficulties or dismissing possible supporters or allies by a supercilious claim of cultural and political autonomy. In Nairobi, Africa was at the same time acted upon and the actor—in practice and words. These constraints weighed both on African and non-African activists.

the latter always trying to pre-empt possible charges of paternalism, as they expressed various degrees of ethnocentrism in their relations with African causes and activists.

Was this WSF a success? The answers to this question, during and after the Forum, revealed the position of non-African activists towards Africa (as a reality that they knew more or less, and as an issue that mattered more or less). The members of the African Social Forum, or the representatives of the Kenyan Organizing Committee, claimed that the criticisms of the material organization of the Forum focused on elements that should have been excusable or neglected due to the difficulties specific to Africa, revealing the "neocolonialism" of some Northern activists. Many representatives of international NGOs, more familiar with Africa than some of their radical counterparts, found, sometimes not without paternalism, that "for Africa," it was a success. Conversely, the most virulent critics of the organization were often those for whom the African dimension of the Forum was not an issue. Some, such as the networks of the Comité pour l'annulation de la Dette du Tiers Monde, wished to denounce "the elite" of the ASF. Others argued that since a country of the South had succeeded in organizing a WSF with good popular participation (in Mumbai), there was no point in sparing Kenyan organizers.

Northern activists often feared being considered patronizing. At the WSF, they thus seldom criticized African governments, even the most repressive ones. Such issues can be touchy. As most NGOs considered some African governments to be "puppets" or accomplices of Northern governments, they let Africans decide whether to criticize their leaders or not. Thus, in a workshop on "Extractive and Local Livelihoods," activists of the Niger Delta accused the federal government of Nigeria of being an accomplice of the oil companies, while the Western participants denounced "an ugly face of capitalist exploitation" and blamed it on the United States and Britain (direct observation). Admittedly, there is nothing more shared than anti-imperialism at a WSF, especially since the revival of this term, for instance through the writings of Hart and Negri (2000). But even Northern activists' solicitude towards the "victims of imperialism" could be perceived as patronizing. When the debates corresponded to what they claimed to wish (Southern voices speaking about the South), they tended to offer their help by encouraging civil societies from the North to criticize governments of the North, and letting civil societies from the South do the same, if they wished or could.

with their own governments. They thus set out a form of an international division of labor for criticism, strongly structured by double binds and censorships about who has the legitimacy to speak about what and to criticize whom.

Northern activists, of course, do not have a unified perception of Africa, as very diverse militant layers coexist within the WSF, including development and aid organizations, Trotskyites opposed to war, Christian militants against Southern debt, mainstream or radical feminists, and "first hour anticolonialists." Moreover, the behavior of Northern activists and their ethnocentrism sometimes had less to do with their ideologies, and more with their familiarity with the continent, their socialization, or their social position. Such radical activists would vilify the venality of the African "volunteers" of the WSF (most of whom were, in fact, paid). Some participants would take photos of street children without questioning the meaning of their gestures. Other radical militants would insist on putting their local partners (whose travel their organization had financed) out in front as evidence of their grassroots constituencies. "Tiers-mondistes"<sup>15</sup> would stay in one of the very comfortable hotels necessary to host their whole delegation, and ensure adequate meeting space and access to the Internet. Conversely, those most familiar with the continent did not idealize the participation of the poorest Kenyans, and did not regard the looting of an overly expensive food concession (owned by a close relative of the Kenyan Minister of Home Affairs) by street children as a completely positive act, worrying what would happen to these children once the activists who had supported them had left.

A striking aspect of WSFs in general is the revitalization of earlier emancipatory ideologies advanced by or for the Third World, such as demands for a "New International Economic Order" to counteract the dependency produced by colonialism and pan-Africanism, both of which were challenged in the 1980s with the rise of neoliberal globalization. The strong presence of these themes is undoubtedly linked to their resonance with many core values and principles of the WSF process, as well as to the subtle—and sometimes vague—ways in which they are expressed. In various workshops, for instance, in Nairobi, activists could rediscover or very likely encounter for the first time dependency theory (Samir Amin, its most renowned proponent, was among the "stars" of the WSF) and "Third Worldism." "Third world is the third estate of the world," declared Gus Massiah, of the Centre d'Études Anti-impérialistes (CEDETIM), thereby reclaiming the origin of the term. Liberation theology (with

one of its main theorists, the canon and sociologist François Houtard), all forms of anticolonialism (the “Frantz Fanon space” was particularly active) and finally Afrocentrism, either in its Afro-American (Malcom X grassroots movement) or African (cf. many references to Sheik Anta Diop) versions were all represented in the program. Throughout the WSF, a moderated form of Afrocentrism seemed to be one of the processes making it possible to claim agency and to mobilize identity and pride, while denouncing neoliberal globalization’s impacts on Africa. Thus, it was a way of binding what Gamson (1992) identified as three central components of collective action: injustice, agency, and identity.

A first aspect of this Afrocentrism classically consisted of pointing out what Africa could be proud of, including the celebration of African intellectuals such as Sheik Anta Diop and Joseph Ki Zerbo. The great historical figures of African independence struggles were evoked through the names given to the physical spaces of the Forum. Meeting places were given exclusively African names (except for Che Guevara): Amilcar Cabral, Chris Hani, Dedan Kimathi, Mary Nyanjiru, Mekatilili Wa Menza, Modibo Keita, Patrice Lumumba, Ruth First, or Thomas Sankara—all of them being dead heroes of independences, martyrs of colonialism or apartheid.

The choice of the names of spaces speaks for itself: It expressed the ambivalent relation that African alterglobalists have to African leaders. On the one hand, they strongly assert the sovereignty of African states, but are aware that this can be used by governments as a tool for legitimation, as was done historically when anti-imperialism was fastened onto a project of national construction. On the other hand, they criticize the “puppets of the North” (i.e., national leaders). The criticism of the corruption of some African leaders was done more in private situations, between friends, from the North or the South, and not only out of fear of reprisals once returned home. While “beginner” activists (here, Kenyans, peasants, squatters, hawkers who came to testify) did not hesitate to clearly denounce the political leaders, senior activists have adopted, since their beginnings, an ambivalent attitude. The dilemma faced by the majority of critics of domination is: What can be said against these leaders that will not be exploited by adversaries? Criticizing African leaders can provide new arguments to the international financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, always eager to denounce corruption and encourage “good governance.”

Pan-Africanism, the call for a true United States of Africa, seems to have been embraced as a way of challenging African leaders without

having to spell it out, because, in calling for union there is an implicit critique of colonization and inherited borders. The denunciation of the debt is very revealing of these rhetorical strategies. The example of the debt of the Democratic Republic of Congo is very often used, undoubtedly because it makes it possible to criticize a *former* African leader, Mobutu, and explain why Africans should not have to pay the debt of an illegitimate dictator supported by Western countries. It thus allows Africans to say that Western countries are still accountable for the horrors committed by their ancestors.

More generally this form of “side” criticism, which consists of denouncing vague or remote culprits and processes (economic partnership agreements, international financial institutions, Northern imperialism, heritage of colonization) was frequently found in Nairobi. That, indeed, makes it possible to endorse a critical discourse, even when one is a citizen of an authoritarian regime. It thus reconciled a moderate activism within one’s national space with a radical language directed towards external enemies in international circles. It therefore left the question of accountability of national leaders blurred. This seems to be a strong characteristic of what the alterglobalist discourse allows. It is amplified by the fact that African activists can seldom allow themselves to confront their leaders head on.

Another way of combining agency and the critique of domination was observed in speeches evoking the evils of Africa, but at the same time denying these evils by claiming that Africa is so much more than that. Kenyan activist Wahu Kaara’s speech at the opening ceremony of the WSF reflected this form of expression, which, in the context of an energetic speech, mobilized, indeed, a form of agency:

Africa is not a dying continent!  
 Africa is not a bargain continent!  
 Africa is not a poor continent!  
 Africa is not a dying continent!  
 Africa is not a continent of diseases!  
 Africa is not a continent of malnutrition!  
 Africa is a continent of human spirit!

It can be very sentimental and very emotional . . . very sentimental and very emotional because we are here in Nairobi to say that Africa is here and now to stay! Yeah! And I am saying this as an African woman because we have refused to die we are living for Africa. . . . (fieldwork notes, January 20, Uhuru Park, Nairobi)



The making of this African agency also resulted in the delimitation of “them” and “us” as a way of tracing the borders between friends and enemies, between those who can legitimately endorse the cause of Africa, and those who cannot. Kaara’s speech marked this very strong division between “us” and “them”:

no matter what agendas THEY have ... no matter what power THEY have ... be it economic or be it political be it whatever ... this time around the World Social Forum has given an opportunity to make a linkage with the others all over the world.

This cleavage among you-us-them appeared in many workshops. “Us” was being used as Africa and “You” as “the North.” That could appear paradoxical in a Forum defined, according to its charter, as an “open space,” a coordination of movements from all over the world. To point out this cleavage is often a way to prevent Northern activists from dominating struggles for the South.<sup>16</sup> This you-us divide could be very situational, expressing the bitterness African activists felt when realizing that the place where they stayed was far less comfortable than that of the Western activists, that they did not have the means to buy the food or drink sold at the WSF venue at prices designed for Westerners, or when, in a workshop, people who they felt had no legitimacy to talk monopolized speeches. When expressed, this cleavage made Western delegates turn silent.

African identity within the WSF was thus prone to transformations depending on the interaction or situation. From the remote “them” of the international financial institutions, which was central in building the inclusive “us” of the participants to the WSF, activists shifted quickly to a less clear “you” and “us,” that could crystallize a “situational anti-imperialism” where the “you” indicated the North, the whites, the moderate ones, that is, all those who were resigned too easily to the unjust order of the world. Conversely, a Northern activist who idealized “African tradition” could be challenged for this caricatured and antimodern vision of Africa. Whereas in a mixed audience, the reference to the traditions “that work” is a classic one, and relates to certain currents of development ideologies, which insist that traditions should be used as a tool of social engineering in order to aid poor countries’ development. The same ambivalence towards a supposed African tradition or identity could be observed when it came to religion. According to the situation, religion

could be alternatively denounced as an obstacle to the emancipation, or on the contrary, put at the very heart of the “African soul.” The South African case is characteristic of this unstable African identity. South Africans enjoy legitimacy due to their fight against Apartheid, but they are often regarded as insufficiently or “not exactly” African, as “atypical” (for their specific historical trajectory, their exemplary transition to democracy, their leaders’ promotion of neoliberal economic policies, or as the only African country authorizing homosexual marriage, etc.). These aspects thus raise the question of the forms of legitimacy asserted by militants.

#### *CULTURAL LEGITIMATION AND SELF-CENSORSHIP*

Organizing a WSF in Africa was almost an injunction to make Africa central within the Forum. However this “injunction to Africa,” even as it opened a space of competition to speak in the name of Africa, resulted in various forms of claims of cultural legitimacy and authenticity. What was at stake was the right to talk, sometimes against the North, but also vis-à-vis other African activists. The first aspect of this cultural call to legitimacy is asserting traditions or cultural features and claiming that agency and identity result from those cultural resources. This tradition could be a militant one, for example, the reference to independence and the struggle against Apartheid. Tradition was also asserted through forms of expression, such as singing or dancing, often done between the sessions or inaugurating them. It could also be more largely depicted as an “African culture,” sometimes idealized, often poorly clarified, and associated with consensus, a sense of community, the role of the family, the importance of elders and other traditional social bonds, or male-female complementarities.

But this reference to a (re)invented tradition did not have as its only role the dismissal of Northern activists perceived as too quick to take over struggles. Indeed, no militant from the North, within the WSF, dared to challenge an African activist as not having a legitimate right to speak. An African at the WSF was at least supposed to be a witness, even a victim, attesting personally to the misfortunes of Africa. Thus, in a workshop on migration, women who had tried to cross the desert told their stories and were listened to as victims. In a workshop at the Franz Fanon space, a Kenyan from the Sengwer group explained how his community had been deprived of its land. This implicit assignment

to the status of witness is ambivalent. It makes the people worth being heard, as much as is any activist. But in the WSF it turned every African talking into a potential witness, even when African activists did not *mean* to make testimonies. The politeness and attentiveness of many Western activists towards their African counterparts, as well as the tendency not to contradict, was therefore linked to the fact that Africans were often not treated as activists but as something else: victims or witnesses, but far less often as experts.

The issue of African-ness also had a central role in situations where the public was mainly African, and where one then saw competing strategies of representativeness. What seemed to be at stake in this internationalized space that sometimes looked so much like just another international conference, was to avoid being challenged as non-African (that is, being too "Westernized," cut off from grassroots, or traveling too much). This was the case for some Kenyan artists who performed at the Forum "in the name of a sacrifice for Africa," and who reluctantly acknowledged that they spent most of their time in the United States for professional reasons. This tendency to cultural legitimation bears a strong denial of extraversion (Bayart 2000) and internationalization. It raises a central issue, as charges of "not representing anybody" were often heard, in criticism of some "stars" of African alterglobalism. One cannot deny that the transnationalization of activism can contribute to worsening the gap between the most internationalized activists, sometimes those most gifted with social and financial resources, and the others. Hence this insistence to show that one is actually African, that is, "culturally" African, that one does not reproduce colonialist patterns, does not travel, and is therefore more "rooted" than "cosmopolitan" (Tarrow 2005).

This was particularly evident in the workshops relating to sexuality. Northern activists here tried to be discreet, and avoided appearing to be imposing discourses that would have been rejected if promoted by the North. This was reflected in the workshop "Reclaiming Our Sexualities" at the Queer Spot. This workshop benefited from the support of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), reflected in the discrete presence of its communication officer Stephen Barris, who confined himself to the Spanish-English translation. The goal was clearly to minimize the presence of whites on this theme during the Forum, as acknowledged in a report written afterwards.<sup>17</sup> This was by far the workshop where we heard the most discussion about Africa (the term *Mother Africa* was even used) and what was "really" African. The

homosexuality was "not African" appeared to be the major obstacle to address. The audience was mixed, with a small African majority. With these short interventions one after the other, the goal seemed to be increased visibility rather than a potentially explosive dialogue (although small group dialogues with Kenyans in English and Kiswahili had been organized before). Four of the five speakers were African, all of them from English-speaking countries. The South African activist and poetess contested the use of homophobia by postcolonial leaders who affirmed that homosexuality was "un-African." The Nigerian woman recounted her work on homosexuality in Nigeria:

There are people who are born Nigerians, who are living in Nigeria, who have never left the country, but who have same-sex relationships. In English you would say they are homosexuals, in the local language it was more difficult to find a language for the behavior because with the advent of colonialism and Christianity and the Jihad that took place ... a local language censorship has taken place as they try to institutionalize the moral code that they have brought in.

She recalled that although the absence of the term *homosexual* in her language was used to argue that the reality did not exist, traditional terms indicate this type of relations, and could be discovered by questioning old people. The leader of the Coalition of African Lesbians then held up a book of anthropologists, collecting life stories and testimonies of lesbians in Africa. She insisted on the importance of this compilation and challenged the idea of homosexuality as un-African, calling for a reappropriation of terminology "to tell our communities who we are without using colonial language." The same manner of speaking about what is really African—or not—could also be found in less radical workshops, connected to the world of international development and Northern NGOs, for example on the best ways to fight HIV in Africa. This claim of African-ness shouldn't therefore be understood as a result of a hypothetical and rigid "African culture," but rather as an illustration of the constraints faced by activists when trying to build a collective identity, and particularly an identity that couldn't be claimed by rival associates in the alterglobal movement. Transnationalization of activism does not dilute national and cultural identities, rather, it encourages the assertion of identities that can be legitimately claimed as proof of having

*REFLECTIONS ON THE 2011 WORLD SOCIAL FORUM IN DAKAR, SENEGAL*

Along with the research team who accompanied us at the Nairobi WSF, we attended the 2011 WSF in Dakar, Senegal, where we observed workshops and surveyed 1,100 participants. The team was struck by the many similarities they saw in these two African WSFs. There was, for instance, continued reliance on Northern organizations for resources and a remobilization of discourses of Afrocentrism and anti-imperialism. There was also a notable presence of professionalized NGOs, and a persistence of inequities in activists' ability to participate effectively in WSF activities. We also observed continued self-censorship by Africans in critiquing African leaders in workshops with mixed audiences. In contrast, the most critical discourse we heard on African leaders was in a workshop held by ActionAid Uganda, where Siméant was the only white person in the audience, and where activists talked of their inability to criticize African leaders "because they kill us" (Siméant field notes February 9, 2011).

An important difference between the Nairobi and Dakar WSFs, however, is the fact that Senegal is a French speaking and mainly Muslim country. Thus, there was less participation by South Africans, Kenyans, and other activists from English-speaking Africa, and therefore more openings for participation by groups that had been less involved in earlier Forums. This meant that many meetings did not have the same energetic style as Nairobi—no *Amandlas* here! More significantly, local sensitivities around issues of sexuality made it difficult for LGBT rights organizers to make their concerns visible at the Forum. We were also struck by the underrepresentation of local religious actors at this Forum, compared to Nairobi. This was likely due more to the constellation of the local organizing committee in Dakar than to a deliberate exclusion of religious-based organizations. World Social Forum participants, for instance, followed and offered their support for Imam-led protests against power cuts held in a nearby suburb.

The Assembly of Social Movements at the Dakar WSF continued to demonstrate the Forum's dynamism and potential for popular mobilization. It was energized both by the uprisings taking place simultaneously in Tunisia and Egypt and by performances of popular young Senegalese rappers, who, diverging from patterns we saw in the workshops, openly criticized the Senegalese government. These rappers from the Dakar suburbs, Matador, Fou Malade, and Thiat from the group Keur Gui, later launched the *Y'en a marre* ("enough is enough") collective, which

was particularly active in the huge protests against President Wade's constitutional reform program in late June and July 2011.

## CONCLUSION

Examining African participation in the WSF suggests two important aspects that need to be taken into account in the study of transnational activism. The first is the necessity to examine concrete conditions, and the second is that social movements must not be considered unified actors. They should be seen as spaces of struggle and tension around the right to legitimate speech, and in this case, legitimate speech for Africa. This struggle, moreover, results largely from the paradoxical position activists necessarily confront as they claim to advance goals of equity and participation in a global order that is hierarchical and exclusive. Internationalization complicates this reality already experienced by social movements within national frameworks. These two aspects, although analytically distinct, are not separable. Dealing in detail with the concrete conditions of transnational protest (a "sociology of the plane ticket") shows where the tensions, alliances, and also lines of domination are in the spaces of transnational protest. Without being only a reflection of it, certain ideological confrontations are a way of translating, in protest language, realities that correspond to antagonisms of social position, on a national or an international scale. This material and symbolic study of the WSF underlines how far the reality of this protest event is from the egalitarian image of a global civil society.

But it also shows how it is possible for newcomers, outsiders, or dominated actors to challenge the unequal relationships they are confronted with even in the international activist world, through the use of symbols and discourses linked to cultural legitimacy and the possibility of building an "us." Further research will need to address how new legitimacies acquired in internationalized activist space are used in national contexts.

## NOTES

1. We use the term *alterglobal* (a translation of the French "*altermondialiste*") *movement*, which is meaningful for European and Latin American activists and is preferred to the *global justice movement*, perceived as too consensual and too Anglo-Saxon.

2. Referring initially to trade brokers, the term *comprador* was used in

dependency theory to name local bourgeoisies in countries dominated by the North and whose interest was to collaborate with it.

3. Our work is based on a collective survey conducted in Nairobi in January 2007. Thirty-seven scholars carried out collective ethnographic observations in 130 workshops of the WSF, along with 150 interviews with African activists at the Forum. All the members of this team conducted interviews and/or ethnographic observations and should be therefore thanked.

4. See [http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id\\_menu=3\\_2\\_1&cd\\_language=3](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=3_2_1&cd_language=3) (retrieved July 2, 2007).

5. The draft final report published in April 2007 by the organizing committee mentioned 74,309 registrations.

6. There were also between 1,000 and 1,500 Indians, 150 Pakistanis, 600 North Americans, 400 Brazilians, 20 Haitians, 1,000 French, 400 Italians, 240 Belgians, 150 Spaniards, and 50 British.

7. Our research team observed a bit more than 10 percent of the registered panels. We did not attend panels that were organized only by Latin Americans or Asian organizations nor did we participate in panels where issues discussed were not affecting the African continent. The main themes of the panels observed were food sovereignty, war and peace, international trade, debt, land issues, work and trade unionism, human rights, environment, media, migrations, women, civil society, and sexual issues.

8. The ecumenical network led by Caritas and the All African Church Conference sent a letter to the organizing committee in November 2006 asking for a decrease of the entry fee to 40 Kenyan shillings (\$0.60 U.S. dollars) and for the establishment of a solidarity fund.

9. African organizations have been sponsored by French Cooperation, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Oxfam Novib, and the Comité Catholique contre la Faim et pour le Développement (CCFD) to prepare the African Social Forum in Bamako in 2002 and to attend the second World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2002.

10. Panel "Reclaim People's Source of Livelihood—The Land Struggle of People of Kenya and Sub-Saharan Africa" organized by the Kenya Land Alliance, January 23, 2007.

11. This fear of a South African hegemony was also present in the Southern African Social Forums (Dwyer and Larmer 2006).

12. These divisions were clearly expressed when South Africa was considering hosting the WSF. Activist groups were so divided that they preferred to abandon the idea of hosting the forum.

13. The Assembly of Social Movements is traditionally held at the end of the WSF, and was attended by around 500 people in Nairobi. Its main organizers were the World March of Women, the Committee for the Abolition

of Third World Debt (CADTM), Focus on the Global South, and individuals like Christophe Aguiton.

14. Organized by the Building Eastern Africa Community Network (BEACON), Equal in Rights, and Kenya Human Rights Commission, January 21, 2007.

15. Literally, "Third-Worldist" refers to this powerful ideology born in the 1950s.

16. The cleavage is then more North-South than Africa-North. During a Jubilee workshop, a young antidebt activist from Norway was contradicted by an Ecuadorian activist who challenged "this guy from the North, a young man."

17. "World Social Forum—Nairobi 2007 Respect for All! Another World Is Possible—for African LGBT People, Too," February 26, 2007. Retrieved July 26, 2010 (<http://www.babels.org/forum/viewtopic.php?p=2961>).