



**Call for Papers**

## **Making Sense of Religion Performance, Art and Experience**

11th Conference of the SIEF Working Group on Ethnology of Religion  
Lisbon, Portugal 22-23 May, 2014

Religion has always been directly connected with embodied experience, artistic manifestations of ritualism, and creative performances of getting in touch with the sacred. Classic ethnological and anthropological theory of performance places emphasis on the 'social dramas', namely the actions of social interaction in the communicational 'metatheatre' (Turner 1987) of identity and status negotiation in everyday life. Religious performance has thus been considered as a genre of social action, as an art that it is open and liminal, a 'paradigm of process' (Schechner 1987). The study of the performative and artistic discourses in the field of contemporary religious practice is not new to ethnology, folklore, anthropology and to the social sciences in general, however little attention has been paid to the 'pluri-sensorial' (Barna-Fikfak 2006, Howes 1991) character of religious experience, and the creative transformations entailed in the process. Despite the recognition that bodies are mindful (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), and the centrality of sensory perception in any form of performance, art, and religious act, social scientists continue to ignore the role of the senses in their analyses of religious practice.

Religious experience has also been tied to other forms of social expression and production. For example, anthropologists of spirit possession traditions are prone to associate the experience and content of such forms of mystical contact to other modes of relation, such as those engendered in oppressive socio-political and economic contexts. While also irreducible to this, religious practices such as spirit mediation are often seen as ways of performatively resisting, if also reinterpreting and reintegrating, social realities. Performance here is read not necessarily as a theatrical or intentionally mimetic impulse, but as the articulation of subjectivities through the acting, moving body and its manifold, often covert, registers. It is unsurprising that an emphasis has been placed in recent anthropology on the phenomenology (and cognition) of processes of "embodiment" or the "mindful body". While classic ritual theory generated concerns with the shaping of emotional, physical and social experience through techniques (and disciplines) of the body and its sensorium, performance theorists have

expanded these concerns to include the role of illocutionary, aesthetic, material and dramatic processes in the expression of religious cosmology and its dividends. This has also implied a shift towards recognizing the profoundly self-reflexive, recursive dimensions of religiosity and its manifestations.

Re-centralizing the importance of sensory perception, we call for ethnographic and/or theoretical contributions that: a) make sense of religion through performance and art and b) approach performative and artistic action as religion in a variety of sociocultural, political, and spiritual contexts.

This conference thus aims to explore themes within the ethnology of religion, as well as within folklore-oriented studies, that speak to their fundamental capacity to sense which performs itself, through and with its actants, audiences, and media. At stake is a reconsideration of the universality of distinctions such as those between private and public religious experiences; the experience of intimate, “real” selves versus their performance or social construction; the existence of orthodoxies and established ontologies in counterpoint to their diversification, globalization, commoditization. We aim to ask not what the senses and “performance” of religion does to it (corrupts it, enhances it, promotes it, transforms it), but in what senses religion is constituted by its virtual or inherent senses, performativities and aesthetics? We ask how sport, technologies, artistic movements and forms of consumption, as well as modes of social and gender contestation, reveal and articulate religious dimensions; as well as how these can form novel configurations of religions themselves.

Taking these points in mind, some specific topics within anthropology, ethnography and folklore studies we aim to focus are:

- ritual: sensing and performing
- senses, performance and popular religious art
- trends and consume of popular religious art and social contestation
- popular religious art in past and present
- feminism, gender and religious art
- contemporary spirituality and art
- performance, heritage and religious “authenticity”

**Format:** the conference takes place over two days, followed by an excursion on the third day. Paper presentations are limited to 20 minutes each, followed by ten minutes of discussion. In total 20 paper presenters can be selected. Colleagues who do not present a paper are welcome to participate in the conference and its discussions. A business meeting of the Working Group will be held during the conference.

**Organizers:** the conference is organised by the Center for Research in Anthropology (CRIA) and the Ethnology of Religion Working Group of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF).

**Venue:** Universidade Nova de Lisboa-FCSH

**Fee:** the conference fee is 60 €, incl. conference materials, reception, coffee, lunch. Participants are responsible for travel and accommodation; there is no funding for expenses available.

**Application:** submit an abstract of your paper of maximum 300 words, together with your name, position, and institutional affiliation to Dr. Clara Saraiva [clarasaraiva@fcs.unl.pt](mailto:clarasaraiva@fcs.unl.pt) and Dr. István Povedák [povedakistvan@gmail.com](mailto:povedakistvan@gmail.com) by **January 15, 2014**. The selection of the papers will be done in collaboration with the Board of the Working Group Ethnology of Religion. The final selection will be communicated by **February 15, 2014**.

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