

Imagining the Nation

Independence Ceremonies under Rebel Domination in Northern Côte d'Ivoire

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We would not expect insurgents to celebrate the very state that they combat at all costs. In northern Côte d'Ivoire, however, the rebel movement of the Forces Nouvelles, the "New Forces," not only engaged in a sustainable provision of public goods, they also created new modes of representation that on the one hand built on the former experience of the state but simultaneously developed a sort of draft of how the nation should look like in the future. Both the iteration of the past into the present and the imagination of a promising future with a better state were less the subject of a closed discourse but much more at the center of highly attractive if not seductive performances. The nation as an imagined community (Anderson 2006, Hansen and Stepputat 2001) and its imaginary (Castoriadis 1998, Taylor 2003)—that is, the normative expectation how its members should live together—were themes that pervaded many ceremonial events staged by the rebels and their allies. Almost all ceremonies in the rebel-held part of the country rotated around this theme that had become more and more problematic over the past two decades: the Ivoirian nation. The inauguration of the monument for the unknown rebel soldier was one such occasion to make claims to its past, present, and future; another was the construction and opening of a cultural center (Förster in press). Probably the most impressive were, however, the festivities on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of independence on August 7, 2010.

The inherited images of the state were transformed into something different: into an image how a new Ivoirian nation could re-emerge after the end of the old nation-state (Fig. 1). The imagination of the past was not a given but much more the outcome of the changing relationships between the different actors: "We

must not think of imagination as a simple power but as a complex series of processes" (Klein et al. 1983:15). Imagination is best conceptualized as a social practice that is an essential part of the actors' agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). The rebel movement and in particular its strongmen had a say in it, but it was much more shaped by the interaction between them and other actors, who articulated their claims and interests by how they engaged in the performances or abstained from them. These deeply political interactions shaped the images of the past and produced images of and for the future. As a social practice, imagination links the images of the past to the images of the future and vice versa.

Images have a mental character, but they stimulate or lead to "real, material" pictures (Mitchell 1992) that the spectators saw when they attended the event. How these pictures looked, how they were embedded in the overarching ceremonial performance of what is perhaps best and paradoxically called a postnational nationalism, and how that worked on the social imaginary is the subject of this article. By showing how remembrance and projectivity together shape the production of images of the past and the future, I hope to address two weak points at opposing ends of the more theoretical literature: first, Benedict Anderson's seminal work on the state as an imagined community (2006) adopts a narrow, Foucauldian understanding of discourse as a sequence of written or oral enunciations that relate to each other and frame what can be said and thought about a particular signifier, in this case the nation.¹ Such an understanding of discourse largely ignores nonverbal statements and says virtually nothing about the power of images and pictures in the discursive formation of nationalism. At the other end of the theoretical landscape, post-Marxist discourse analysis takes all possible expressions—written, oral, visual, olfactory, haptic—as parts of



1 Soldiers marching on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of independence from France in Korhogo, Côte d'Ivoire, August 2010.

discursive formations if they are perceived as intentional acts by the participants (Laclau 1996, 2000). Such an understanding ignores the specific character of sensory experience and implicitly presumes that visual “enouncements” work like their oral or written counterparts in a discursive formation. However, it is highly debatable to assume that pictures and visual experience produce sense the same way as written or oral language does. If there is a difference, we would have to acknowledge that pictures evocate sense by other means, namely because they appresent a structural context and not a linear, temporal narrative.² The more general question is whether it is appropriate to frame the relationship that links pictures as “discursive” (Förster et al. 2011). Such an alternative approach would lead to a perhaps more appropriate understanding how pictures relate to each other, why they sometimes enhance each other or why they clash under other circumstances.

Secondly, acknowledging the deeply political character of a “pictorial” formation means to recognise that the collective memory of the past and its cultural heritage is inevitably political, too. Hardly a new claim, it means that the nation as a signifier is always bound to the present social imaginary and how the actors imagine the future. The question is not so much how the actors imagine the past but more how the practice of imagination creates social and political spaces that foster nascent pictorial formations.

A MOMENT OF DISLOCATION

On August 7, 2010, the insurgents in northern Côte d'Ivoire staged independence ceremonies that, officially, should have had the same theme as their counterparts in the southern parts of the country, held by troops loyal to incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo: the fiftieth anniversary of independence from France.

Then in its eighth year, the rebellion was well established in the North, the Center, and the West of Côte d'Ivoire. In almost all bigger towns, the rebels invited the population and civil society organizations to participate in the ceremonies. The biggest events were, unsurprisingly, those in Bouaké, where the insurgents have their military and administrative headquarters, and those in Korhogo, by far the biggest city in the North, counting about 170,000 inhabitants. However, what the rebels did not know by then was that they were the only ones to organize ceremonies at that scale. The Gbagbo administration in the South attempted to stage its power in Abidjan but at the end of the day brought only a conference on “Independence and Future Perspectives in Sub-Saharan Africa” in Yamoussoukro off the ground.³ The large and pompous parade that should have taken place in the capital Yamoussoukro under the eyes of distinguished guests, including heads of state from other African countries, was given up in favor of a very small, nonpublic ceremony at the presidential palace in Abidjan. Only the Nigerian vice-president participated. Though the ceremony was declared to be a commemoration of the glorious independence struggle, there was not much to remember. Those who had fought for independence or their successors were not invited or did not come. Most of them now belonged to opposition parties and obviously had no interest to be visible at a ceremony that was seen by many as an event in favor of the ruling party.⁴ Unsurprisingly, the northerners later interpreted the mere fact that the rebels were able to do more than the internationally recognized administration in the South as a sign of state weakness.

My starting point is to what degree and how the visual imagery of the ceremonial staging of the nation and the state as two separate entities is linked to a rupture in the political imagination. The political dislocation of the North and its population



2 A soldier of the National Army harassing an old man because of his identity paper shows that he has a Muslim name. Detail of a mural by Sap Héro at the Cultural Centre of Korhogo, 2006.

had caused a break in the visual imagery of the nation and vice versa opened a space for new images. Taking imagination as an essential part of agency, it means that the staging of the ceremonies built on three elements, namely habits and habitual practices, judgement, and, last but not least, imagination. The three elements always work together, but they do so to varying degrees. During the ceremonies, the habitual side became visible in the continuity of performances and pictures that once belonged to the state's imagery. The rebels had appropriated its imagery and made it theirs, but the spectators were used to it and saw its pictures at least to some degree as a part of their national heritage. As we shall see later, habitual practice can be creative because it generates a stable image of the past that may serve as a reliable basis for the future (Dalton 2004). Imagination, however, is about something that is not there—perhaps not yet—and that may guide the actors' attempts to shape their own future. Without an imagination of what the social world and an appropriate political order should look like, there would be no agency, as the current revolutions in North Africa demonstrate.

Imageries are more than merely the visual side of the contested field that is framed by the political imagination of the actors. Because of their perceptual character, imageries work on the beholder. Accordingly, it would be a mistake to take the independence ceremonies solely as a mirror of a changing political imagination; one has to understand the ceremonies as a social space where the agency of the actors is at stake—and on stage. To understand the ceremonies, one has to bring two strands of analysis together. Firstly, it is necessary to look at how the various stakeholders relate to each other and also to absent third parties,

such as the institutions in the South and the very few representatives that they sent to the rebel held area after the signature of the Ouagadougou peace treaty in March 2007. Secondly, the work of the imageries needs to be addressed. In particular the presence of an older imagery that feeds into the emergence of new images is a dimension that tells us a lot about how pictures and images iterate from the past to the present and how they may then become part of the social imaginary.

How the interaction of actors and imageries contributed to the discursive formation of a novel political imagination of the nation beyond the nation-state is then a wider theme that extends beyond the time horizon of this paper. However, the nascent postnational understanding of the nation does not only foster a new political imaginary, it also shapes the remembrance of already existing images. Some images that were once part of the state's imagery and at the center of the social imaginary fade and literally disappear while others are maintained and even enhanced through the process. The once so dominant image of the first president as the founding father of the nation is a case in point. It faded out and is no longer part of the national imagery.

But before looking at the imagery of the nation, I need to go into the history of the rebellion or, more precisely, into its discursive roots in the 1990s. When the first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, nicknamed FHB or simply *le vieux*, "the old man," died in his 90s in 1993 after thirty-three years of reign, he left an ambiguous political heritage that had left a deep stamp on the political imagination in Côte d'Ivoire (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). After independence, he had adopted a policy of close cooperation with the former colonial power, France, and an inclusive strategy towards the many immigrants from the countries neighboring Côte d'Ivoire. Though his attempt to grant them dual citizenship had already failed in the 1960s, they were welcomed as a workforce that contributed to the wealth of the country. They held Ivoirian identity cards, but there was virtually no integration policy, at neither the communal nor the national level. This was not a problem as long as the country experienced a steady economic growth. Côte d'Ivoire in the 1970s and still through the 1980s was *le pays de l'hospitalité*, "the country of hospitality." It hosted foreigners from almost all African nations. When Houphouët-Boigny died, roughly 25% of its population originated abroad, and Abidjan, its economic capital, was often called "the West African melting pot." The political imagination of the country, then strongly fostered by the president and his ruling party, was one of a free and open society with a nation that shared no prejudices against its neighbors.

But when Côte d'Ivoire experienced one economic downturn after the other, went through various structural adjustment programs and currency devaluation in 1994, shortly after the death of FHB, the imagination of the nation as an open community came under attack from more than one side. Henri Konan-Bédié, the weak successor of "the old man," wanted to prevent his strongest rival, Alassane Dramane Ouattara, from running for presidency. He made use of an idea that had circulated among artists, writers, and intellectuals since the 1970s, the notorious Ivoirité, which is best translated into English as "Ivoirity" or "Ivoirianness." Bédié developed it into a political instrument that served other purposes besides eliminating his strongest

rival in the upcoming presidential elections of 1995. As a law, it stipulated that full citizenship was only granted to persons who could prove that their grandparents were born on Ivoirian soil—a condition that only very few people in the interior could fulfill because, at the time of their forefathers, very few birth certificates were issued in these parts of the country. As an administrative practice, Ivoirité meant endless harassment by policemen, custom officers, and other state officials, often leading to higher bribes and other “fees” that “full” citizens were not expected to pay. This practice aimed not only at migrants from other parts of Africa, it also targeted the Ivoirian population in the North and West of the country where ethnic identities crosscut national borders (Fig. 2). Having a family name from the North and in addition a Muslim given name meant that one was excluded from the nation as an imagined community. The bearers became subjects of a second category, deprived of citizen rights and many public services.

The effects of Ivoirité are usually analyzed as a hardening of national identity, finally leading into an ethno-nationalist ideology (Banégas 2006, Dozon 2000, Marshall-Fratani 2006). I believe, however, that this interpretation is wrong. Ivoirianness was not a reinforcement of national identity—on the contrary, it was an onslaught on it. Through the second half of the 1990s, it was no longer possible to imagine the nation as the community that FHB once had in mind. The daily reality increasingly contradicted this political imagination. It also meant that the discursive formation, still officially promoted by President Bédié to demonstrate continuity with his political fosterfather FHB, could no longer cover what went on in many daily arenas where the state and its civil servants interacted with their subjects. It threatened Ivoirian identity by creating a lack of possible identification—and thus generated the necessity and respective attempts to reformulate the now dislocated identities of what would become “the Northerners” and others. It was a moment of dislocation in the post-Marxist sense (Laclau 1996, Howarth et al. 2000). In simple words, Ivoirity set the stage for a new political imagination—one that went beyond the usual limits of the nation-state.

The second dislocation turned that quest for a new political imagination into a necessity. It was the failed coup d'état of September 19, 2002. Because the insurgents could not replace the sitting president Laurent Gbagbo and his government by politicians of their choice, they were obliged to formulate a political agenda that did not build on the usual imagery of the president as the father of the nation and the state as an institution with enormous powers, feeding the entire nation (Schatzberg 2001). They needed to articulate an alternative, together with another imagery of the state—one that filled the gap left by the failed coup.

Due to the lack that Ivoirité created by dislocating the political imagination of the nation, it fostered a feeling of national crisis, which corresponded with the necessity to find new imaginary answers to the discursive dislocation. The rebels of course did not express this in the same vocabulary as I do here, but it is safe to say that they were very much aware of the necessity to cover over the imaginary gap that this dislocation had created. Probably, none of them would have put it in words at all, but the visual and performative practice is as eloquent as a text—if not more.



3 The Monument for the Unknown Soldier, erected by the rebels on the occasion of the sixth anniversary of the insurgency. It shows a rebel soldier with a Kalashnikov and a hand grenade, painted in golden bronze. 2009.

AUGUST 7, 2010: BRINGING THE NATION BACK IN

August 7 was not always Independence Day in Côte d'Ivoire. FHB had postponed it to December 7 because of the rainy season that often affected festivities in August. The rebels willingly accepted weather magic performed on their behalf to prove their close relations to the local population. Other preparations were kept secret among the insurgents and their close allies, the so-called traditional hunter associations, the *dozo*.⁵ But what followed was a conspicuous display addressing the entire population of the city of Korhogo. The interaction with the local population was always part of their public political agenda, and although they might feel a need to return to more autocratic actions, they at least framed such acts as a necessity that they, unfortunately, were not able to avoid. The public was invited to attend and to assist whenever possible. The ceremonial acts followed a written agenda, which was distributed to the dignitaries and influential persons as a printed flyer. It also circulated in restaurants and hotels. Yet it was not clear to all inhabitants if the ceremonies would take place, as the South under Gbagbo was planning similar events that might usurp theirs in both attention and funding.

The place of the ceremonies was well chosen. It was a square in front of the tribune that was once erected for the parades of the state's police and military. Its construction dated back to the independence ceremonies of 1964, which had also taken place in Korhogo. On that occasion, the city had received a grid of tar-



(clockwise from top left)

4 Fofié Kouakou, Chief Rebel Commander of Korhogo and Military Zone 5, on August 7, 2010. Kouakou is sought by the United Nations for war crimes committed in 2002 and 2003.

5 The Prefect of Korhogo and Commander Kouakou inspecting the mixed guard of honor composed by “loyal” and “rebel” soldiers. 2010.

6 Rebel soldiers with old guns parading in front of the tribune of honor. 2010.

mac roads and a number of other facilities, among them a big hotel and a new residence for the president that he inhabited for one night. But since the state had passed away, the tribune had changed its character: now, the tribune faced a “Monument of the Unknown Soldier,” erected on the occasion of the sixth anniversary of the insurgency (Fig. 3). It depicted, of course, a rebel soldier carrying a Kalashnikov and a grenade in his hands. It had been erected between the tribune and the barracks of the former National Police, now accommodating a part of the rebel troops. The monument made the square a place of commemoration where the imagery of the state met the recent history of the country, the rebellion, and its claims to political legitimacy.

At the opposite end, the square merged seamlessly with Independence Square at the bottom of the hill where the French had erected the residence of their prefect. The square was framed by two important administrative buildings, the prefecture on one side and the urban council on the other. Initially not much more than a roundabout in front of the former French buildings, it had become a site of memory, a *lieu de mémoire* where the nation became visible as a built environment and through a series of performances (Nora 1986). The traffic island at the center was the place where the French had once put up a flagpole to fly the *tricolore*. The postcolonial state had replaced it with its own *tri-*

colore. The rebels, however, held a competition and invited the fine artists of the city to come up with plans for a monument that would be built where the flagpole once stood. The pedestal was built, but in 2010, the monument was still not completed. It should, the rebel leader said, give the place another, a new meaning, replacing the old sign of state domination by a sculpture that showed a man climbing up a pole that carried a star—also an emblem of the personal unit of commander Fofié Kouakou. Occupying the site and replacing the old sign of state domination was a means to distance rebel governance from the former state and its arbitrary political regime.

The independence ceremonies were expected to take place in this highly representative environment, beginning at Independence Square and linking it to the other commemorative sites of the rebellion’s history. According to the agenda, a defile should have started at 9 AM, but most dignitaries came much later, and the parade only got going at about 10:30 AM. The parade began when the Chief Rebel Commander of the city, Fofié Kouakou, approached in his giant 4WD together with a small escort of bodyguards. His uniform was that of an official commander of a military zone, but complemented by elegant Cartier sun glasses and a brevet showing the star with the lettering “Fansara 110,” the name of the prison and the cell num-



7 Dozo as “traditional” hunters with their ID badges. 2010.

ber where he was detained before he joined the rebel movement (Fig. 4). It became the name of the military unit that he had built up and now commanded. At his waistbelt, he carried a shiny silver gun, visible to everybody sitting on the tribune or standing on the other side of the square.

The rebels had invited the official prefect who, according to the Ouagadougou peace treaty, should have reassumed office almost two years previously. Though the southern government had nominated the prefect, he usually stayed in Abidjan and travelled to Korhogo on rare occasions only. Turning down the invitation to participate in the independence ceremonies, however, would have been a plain statement about his marginal position in the local political arena. The prefect arrived shortly after Commander Kouakou, wearing the official dark blue dress uniform of the state’s *corps préfectoral*. While the audience around me whispered that was good that he came, they also observed that he apparently was not allowed to carry any weapon—while Kouakou displayed his gun overtly to the public (Fig. 5). The two men exchanged military salutes, and together they inspected the troops that had formed up on the square, the rebel commander walking a step behind the prefect. According to military protocol, the civil servant was of a higher status, but to the audience, it was clear who held real power in the city. The prefect was, they

said, *à la merci du commandant*. The French term *commandant* here has a particular historical connotation, which is worth mentioning because it connects the present to the colonial past, when the French commander held absolute power in his county (Delavignette 1950). It was the title of the highest French representative in the regional administrative body. Usually a military officer, the *commandant* stood above democratic divisions of powers and had comprehensive judicial, legal, and executive rights, very much the same position that the rebel commander claimed for himself.

The inspection started with the very small mixed unit that, since the Ouagadougou peace treaty, was supposed to bring soldiers of the two camps together. It consisted of only eighteen men, of whom the fifteen who were armed presented their arms to the commander and the prefect. Their automatic weapons were new, and their scarves were orange, white, and green, as in the flag of Côte d’Ivoire. The mixed brigade was immediately followed by a formation of rebel soldiers. Much more numerous, they carried ordinary, heavily used rifles and had scarves in green, but not in the other two colors of the Ivoirian *tricolore*. Their presentation of the rifles was as exact as that of the mixed brigade, as bystanders proudly remarked. “They are our boys,” said a journalist standing close by as he took photos of them. A young man shouted



8 Masks of the hunter association composed of antelope horns, wood, and fibers. 2010.

that their guns were old but that, with the help of god, they would continue to protect their fatherland. The prefect was then invited to give an address to the population. He delivered a short speech in which he conjured the unity of the country. When he ended his speech, a civil servant of the new urban council presented his city as on its way to a promising future.

Commander Kouakou and the prefect then took seats at the center of the tribune, from where they later followed the parade of the soldiers (Fig. 6). Next to them, the military officers of the UNOCI, the United Nation Peace Keeping Forces, took a seat. Like Kouakou and the prefect, they were wearing their uniforms. The tribune was then filled with representatives coming from the different quarters of the city, for instance quarter headmen and elders of the hunter associations. Before the beginning of the parade, four young girls and six musicians arrived, representing “the community of citizens from Burkina Faso” in Korhogo. The girls were dancing right in front of Commander Kouakou and in the end knelt down to greet him while the prefect turned away from the scene. The performance was a deliberate political demonstration and aimed at articulating a difference to the politics of ethnic exclusion of the Gbagbo administration in the South.

This first part of the ceremony was a highly skilful display of state and rebel emblems. They often mixed or complemented each other. To an outside observer, not familiar with the local imagery of the novel political order, it perhaps looked very much like an ordinary independence ceremony. But it

was much more: it was a construction in which the different visual elements often competed and at times actually clashed. It apparently aimed at a symbolic integration, turning the visual references into a reality of its own. This became much more evident in the sequence that followed.

THE IMAGINATION OF A BETTER CIVIL ORDER

After the inspection of the rebel troops and the dancers’ performance, the first group to parade was a private security company with its yellow motorcycles and cars and its uniforms in yellow and grey. Its employees guaranteed the security of the banks that had recently reopened. Their march was dominated by a display of their superior technical equipment. The men driving the powerful motorcycles had walkie-talkies, mobile phones, and other gadgets.

Next came the *dozo*, the hunters. They were the most important allies of the rebel forces and in charge of security in the inner parts of the city. They were very much the opposite of the security company. Unlike the military and quasi-military groups, they were not marching in rows of two or three. The hunters had adopted the order of ritual status that informed their internal organization and marched in two long lines following each other.



9 Warthog mask of the hunter association performing in front of the Ivoirian flag. 2010.

One came from the association in southern Korhogo, the other from its northern part, the highest-ranking hunter marching at the end of each group. They all wore mud-brown shirts, often with the “traditional medicine” sewn in small packages, protecting them against bullets and rendering them invisible when they were tracking an enemy or a thief. The badges that many of them had attached to their brown shirts documented that they had become part of the security forces under rebel domination (Fig. 7). Though integrated into the new order, it was clear that they had and would always maintain their distinct, largely acephalous organization. Their prominent position in the parade and the respect that they received showed that they were supposed to occupy a central place in the social and political order that increasingly emerged under rebel domination.

Unlike the private security companies, the hunters displayed no modern technical equipment. Instead, they came with their masks and dances. These masks always represent wild animals that the hunters had killed during their nightly expeditions into the wilderness. The masks often incorporate a part of the animal, for instance the horns of an antelope or the tusks of a warthog (Fig. 8). Being part of the independence parade, they were not performing as usual. They were accelerating their dance right in

front of the Ivoirian flag, which was understood by most spectators as a continuation of greeting ceremonies that were usually addressed to the elders of the association (Fig. 9). An ensemble of musicians accompanied them and later led them to the tribune, where the masks and the musicians bowed down to greet the rebel commander (Fig. 10). The march of the hunters was an extraordinary part of the parade and took nearly as long as the defile of the rebel troops earlier. The press and the two local TV stations extensively covered its most spectacular moments.

When they ended, it was announced that the *anciens combattants*, African soldiers who had fought on the side of the French during World War II and in Vietnam, would now parade to support *la nouvelle nation*, “the new nation.” It was only one very old man who slowly and solemnly went from one side of the square to the other.

The incorporation of civil society organizations into the new political order was documented in the series of performances that followed. First came a troupe of cheer girls dressed in the national colors (Fig. 11), then a delegation of Korhogo’s boy scouts, followed by four soccer teams, also in national colors. Much more attractive, however, were the performances of three karate clubs; in particular, a young, good-looking woman who shafted two strong men received much attention (Fig. 12). She did so very close to where the rebel commander was sitting, and he observed the act attentively. It was the only performance that received immediate applause.



10 Singer and musicians of the hunter association accompanying the masks. 2010.

Local and international NGOs paraded then, one after the other. Many of them carried signboards that appealed for peace in the war-torn country. The sequence of their marches was understood by many as a comment on their importance: La Formation Civique et Citoyenne, “Civil and Civic Training” started in orange T-shirts, followed by the “National Civic Service Programme”⁶ in four lines, and a support organization for the defunct University of Korhogo. The defile was then interrupted by an incident: a young man holding a half empty bottle of beer in his hand paraded all alone from one side of the square to the other, staring at the audience and shouting that Côte d’Ivoire was in bad shape. Nobody intervened. Many bystanders did not pay much attention to him, but some were laughing. Others said that it was good to see somebody like him in the midst of all the others who were just denying what really happened in the country.

More civil society organizations followed. The “Association of Children and Young Workers in Partnership with the UNOCI” was a NGO that cooperated with the United Nation Peace Keeping Forces. They had put one of the well-known development slogans on their banner: “Planning and Budgeting.” Representatives of immigrant communities also came with banners. The only international NGO still having a major project in Korhogo was Care. Its members paraded with wheelbarrows pushed by men and women with medical facemasks. The project was about garbage collection, but not very successful.

Different groups of artisans displayed their work next. Weavers from Waraniéné, once a tourist destination, held large painted canvasses, the smiths sat on a pick-up, hammering on an anvil, and finally, an association with the funny name of “Friends of Small Restaurants and Bars” displayed a signboard to the dignitaries on the tribune. They also carried a national flag, but not with the official slogan of the country, “Union, Discipline, Travail” (“Unity, Discipline, Work”). They had replaced it by BVT,

“Bon Vieux Temps” (“Good Old Times”). It was somewhere between a joke and a critique of the present state of the nation. I heard a spontaneous comment when they passed: “Yes, we all would like to eat first. That’s what we need, not war.” Appeals to peace, the national colors and maps of the country were very much present in the parade (Fig. 13).

The parade ended with a defile of two horse riders and about twenty motorcycles. It became so loud that one of the horses refused to continue and tried to throw off its rider. Probably because of the noise, nobody noticed the preparations for a final act that would bring the entire ceremony to an end.

Xylophone players and two men carrying a basket came in and stopped in front of the tribune, where they unloaded the basket. They brought out a *kafigéléjo*, a statue that is usually called a “fetish,” and presented it to the rebel commander (Fig. 14; see also Förster 1988:94–95). It was placed on the ground at the chief rebel commander’s feet. The men declared that the powers that the statue embodied would always be on the side of the right and just, i.e., on the side of the rebellion. The rebel leader received this promise and reminder with deep sincerity and said that the event was brought to a good end. Presenting such a statue to the rebel leader was, on the one hand, a break with the past, but at the other hand a reference to what was usually identified as “tradition.” A *kafigéléjo* is generally kept in a small house and not displayed to the public. One can only approach it when there is a need to do so, when one has a serious problem. Literally translated, its name means “saying clear things”, which is a reminder that the client has to tell the truth when consulting a *kafigéléjo*. The statue represents a very powerful being that requires a cautious handling. Exposing it in such a context was a deliberate choice and showed to all spectators how the statue should be used now, namely as a claim to “tradition.” It was a picture that this part of the regional visual culture should be integrated into the coming national identity.



After the presentation of the *kafigéléjo* and as a response to the words of the rebel leader, a *boloi* troupe started to play its instruments, performing the acrobatic dance of their masks while the rebel troops re-formed rows in the back (Fig. 15). They then carried the Ivorian flag back to the 4WDs.

The staging of the nation as composed of a wide variety of different and to some degree diverging groups and associations was not entirely new in Korhogo. But it had never been put into one consistent framework. References to local culture and to global modernity complemented each other, though many elements did not really fit together. The claims to rational planning surfaced very prominently in the signboards of the NGOs that participated in the parade. The counter-images came from the *dozo* hunters, who all wore their protective medicines on their shirts

and bodies. The display of the *kafigéléjo* was a new framing for an old image, however. As a performance that was mainly based on the older model of independence parades, the ceremony nonetheless left a comparatively coherent image of what Côte d'Ivoire, with Korhogo as one of its bigger cities, should look like. I discussed the event with friends and with people who either supported the rebellion or hoped that the former postcolonial state would be restored. The perceptions were a little different, but within certain limits, most of my interlocutors agreed that there was a significant difference between what they had seen on the national, southern TV channel and what they had seen of independence ceremonies before the beginning of the crisis. The Southerners had also wanted to organize a parade—one that they had planned to simulcast directly from Abidjan. Actually,



12 Woman demonstrating karate fighting to the rebel leader. 2010.

the very small and almost insignificant display that was staged in Abidjan was perceived as by far inferior to what the rebels had organized in their part of the country. The South had visibly lost out in that competition—or in other words, the imagery that the rebels made use of proved to be much more persuasive than the conference that had taken place in Yamoussoukro in the days before August 7. What an Ivoirian nation could be was cast more in images than in an orally communicated discourse.

Most of my interlocutors said that the festivities in the South did not have the same appeal as the festivities in Korhogo—and, of course, they were much smaller. Tellingly, many said so even though they had not seen them. Some added that what the rebels had organized was “different.” But that is an ambivalent term which would have needed further explanation. It brings me to my final discussion of what the event means to the political imagination and the social imaginary.

ATTEMPTS TO COVER A DOUBLE DISLOCATION

Besides those who attended the ceremonies, there were quite a few inhabitants who said that they were not interested in such events. They refused to attend them. Many said it was because they could not afford to close their market stalls or restaurants. Others said that they did not see any sense in organizing something like this if the country was heading towards economic decay and perhaps a political disaster in the elections planned for October and November that year. It is unfortunate that they were right, but that is another issue. What interests me more is that the dislocation produced by Ivoirité and the rebellion that it instigated initiated a quest for new identifications. That quest was answered by a new formation of pictures. Let me analyze the independence ceremony first as an event that brought different pictures together and then as a moment that links the past and the future or, in terms of social practice, memory and projectivity.

13 So-called Waraniéné canvas with the map of Côte d'Ivoire and an appeal to peace. 2010.



As performing art, the independence ceremony was a sequence of scenes that were framed by an overarching choreography. This framework was largely set by how such ceremonies had looked under the former postcolonial state. The parades, the presentations of uniforms, weapons, masks and dances, but also the mere display of physical strength by the *judoka* had had precursors. Some were directly appropriated from former independence ceremonies, others came from other events, such as the cultural festivals that were once organized by the urban councils in Côte d'Ivoire. Still others, for instance the cheerleading, originated in global culture or were instigated by the development world, such as the defile of NGO employees with their barrows. The entire ceremony looked very much like an amalgam of different elements of visual culture that were brought together to explore what the new nation could look like—in a very literal as well as in a figurative sense. The continuity of many pictures was obvious. They were meaningful visual acts because they enacted to some extent the independence ceremonies that had taken place at some past time and iterated them into the present (Connerton 1989:41–72).

However, though related to the former state, the pictures increasingly referred to another signifier: it was no longer the state as an institution but statehood as a way of organizing society.⁷ The imagery of the independence ceremonies apparently took up many old elements. However, they were no longer used in the same sense. While they remained references to a somewhat distant past, they had been submerged in the more recent institutionalization of rebel domination after the failed coup of 2002. There was a visible but unspoken distancing⁸ from the former modes of state domination. Through participating in the performance, the actors dissociated themselves from the mere habitual repetition of representational routines. They adopted a disruptive attitude towards the past and engaged in a new way to stage the nation—one that no longer built on the state as a centralized organization. What has happened since the beginning of the rebellion in 2002, and what became visible here in the ceremonial staging of the nation in a rebel-held area, was a space for a new political imagination—one that gave them the opportunity to participate in its formation. The double dislocation by Ivoirianess and later by the failed coup of 2002 initiated a double process.

14 *Kafigéléjo* statue presented to Fofé Kouakou. 2010.





First, it questioned the way Ivoirians had symbolically constructed their relations to the postcolonial state through an imagery of the state as the institutional nodal point of their national identity. This was no longer possible, as most people in the now rebel-held area experienced the institution as repressive and unjust. The dislocating effect separated the nation from the state. It led to a (icono)clash between the imagery of the former state and the imageries that would emerge under rebel domination.

Second, the double dislocation created the need for a rearticulation of national identity in the rebel-held area. Because of the past with its hardening of identities, they wanted to articulate political claims to their identities within a possible new nation. Since the failure of the 2002 insurgency, it became evident that a discursive formation of a new national imagery could no longer merely repeat the former imagery of the postcolonial nation-state with its displays of national emblems and symbols as flags, uniforms, and military parades. Yet this imagery was still present in the minds of the people. It was a reference that the actors could make use of. They quoted it in the upcoming discursive formation of that novel nation.

The real challenge of the double dislocation was that it called for a central theme, which could become the nodal point of the new political imagination. This nodal point has not emerged clearly yet. It became visible as a contour, not as a dominant idea with a hegemonic effect on the formation of political discourse. On the one hand, the complex and composite imagery, staged at Independence Day, reinforced the belief that a new social and political order was about to emerge. This new order became visible during the ceremony—and the audience experienced it by participating in the event.⁹ They were aware that this staging of the nation was different from the older ones and from those in the South. The imagery that everybody could experience indeed fostered the emerging imagination that an alternative social order is possible. Though limited, it hence had an emancipatory

effect. Many spectators spontaneously commented on the ceremonies as an event that gave them new hope for the future. The sequence of the pictures had created to some extent an image, a mental idea of what an Ivoirian nation after the end of the nation-state could look like. As an image, it fed into the social imaginary of the spectators. Even one year later, after the end of the Gbagbo regime, some of them said that this event showed how all Ivoirians actually should live together. Though certainly only a small building stone, the power of the pictures had influenced the normative imaginary of society.

The actors participating in or attending the Independence Day ceremonies shared to considerable extent ideas of what they were heading for. The complementarity of the different social groups and actors was one, the chance to make a living another. The local was as present as the modern and the global, and both were part of the emerging political imagination. It was still a nation in the making, but it was surely no longer the nation of the postcolony.

In his seminal work, Achille Mbembe (1992, 2002) argued that the postcolony is an inevitable state of society and rejected the dichotomy of oppression and resistance in favor of an all-pervasive banality of power. The postcolony is, he wrote, “chaotically pluralistic,” but still shows an internal coherence (1992:3). In this sense, the tension between imagery and imagination would be endless, not leading anywhere but to simulacra and improvisation. His conceptualization of the African present is perhaps realistic—but it is highly pessimistic, too, not leaving any space for collective agency.

In the case of the rebel-held Ivoirian North, it may be too early to claim that this depiction of the African present is wrong. But there are some signs that the discursive formation may lead to more than just a vicious cycle of the same old story. The majority of the population has an image of a better social order in mind that they want to defend. When the country slipped into the

most recent crisis with an increasingly excessive use of violence in Abidjan and the West, many of my friends and partners in Korhogo insisted that they knew what they had already achieved over the past eight years—a reliable social order that guaranteed safety in a calm and peaceful city. They would defend it, they said. A lot still needed to be done; poverty, in particular, was a challenge, they added. The political imagination is certainly not fully articulated yet—but it exists and informs more than one local initiative to preserve what they have already achieved. At a

more theoretical level, it meant that their agency built to a large extent on the formation of a coherent image—an image that related different social identities. It was part of a discursive formation and still played a role in it. But as picture and image, the independence ceremonies preserved a distinct, visual character.

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Notes

1 The term is a loanword from French and stands for *l'énoncé*, which is also translated as "statement" (Foucault 2002).

2 There is a whole body of literature on how pictures evocate sense. Outstanding contributions are Belting 2001, Boehm 2007, Bredekamp 2010, Mitchell 2005.

3 The conference took place shortly before the anniversary, from August 1–4. It was a highly politicized event and largely boycotted by the opposition. <http://www.ird.fr/toute-l-actualite/colloques-et-manifestations/colloques-conferences/colloque-l-independance-et-les-perspectives-d-avenir-en-afrique-subsaharienne> (accessed July 16, 2011).

4 There were more official ceremonies abroad than in the southern parts of the country, as a look at a news website quickly shows: <http://news.abidjan.net/dossiers/dossier.asp?id=1402> (accessed July 16, 2011). See also N'Guessan 2010:64.

5 The *dozo* are usually described as a traditional hunter association. They claim that they are direct descendants of the hunters of medieval Mali (Hellweg 2004, 2011). However, the continuity to medieval Mali is largely a discursive construction.

6 *Programme du Service Civique National*.

7 Like Migdal (2001), I distinguish between the state as an organization and statehood as the normalized practices that it generates and that shape its understanding.

8 I adapt *distanciation* from Harvey (1985, 1989) and not from Giddens. Unlike Harvey, however, I ground it in an actor-centered understanding of the social. As an intentional act, it does not mean forgetfulness (Connerton 2009).

9 On ethnography and experience as methodological instruments see Förster et al. 2011.

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