### Trade, Ethnicity, and Material Culture

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The Invisible Face: Masks, Ethnicity, and the State in Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa

Christopher B. Steiner

This article examines the critical role of masks and masked performances in the Côte d'Ivoire's government's dual projects of (1) promoting international tourism in light of the country's most severe economic recession, and (2) fostering national unity in the face of growing ethnic factionalism and tension. Although, as I will argue, the ideological frameworks underlying these two goals are in many ways diametrically opposed to one another, I will demonstrate that the use of masks and masked dancing is an attempt on the part of the Ivoirian state to bridge the differences between these two nation-stabilizing strategies and mute their potential contradictions.

Masks and masking in Côte d'Ivoire are found in different forms in a variety of coastal and inland communities. Many of the estimated sixty ethnic groups in the country have their own style of mask carving and their own repertoire of masked dancing and performances. Although some aspects of masking are shrouded under a veil of secrecy and used only in the context of secret society activities, many forms consist largely of public displays intended purely for general entertainment. While these secular forms of masking are often carried out at the local village level, they are sometimes incorporated into public events organized by members of both regional and national government. A meeting of town mayors, a visit to a village by a district (préfecture) administrator, or a national tour by a high-ranking minister or diplomat are all events that would call for the performance of a masked festival. Although certain forms of secular masking probably found expression at the village level in pre-colonial times, I would argue that most public displays of masking became associated with political and bureaucratic events during colonial rule. Huge masked festivals, for example, were organized each summer by the French to celebrate Bastille Day; while smaller masked festivals were often held at the ground-breaking reception for the construction of administrative buildings, at official ceremonies for the naming of city streets, or at the unveiling of colonial monuments (see Gorer 1935:322-28).

Together with their function in national politics, masks and masking in post-colonial Côte d'Ivoire have, in recent years at least, played a critical role in the promotion of international tourism and the marketing of African art (Steiner forthcoming). In any one of the major marketplaces in Côte d'Ivoire, art traders line their stalls with row upon row of carved wooden masks. The major styles are attributed to the Baule, Guro, Senufo, and Dan ethnic groups. Miniature masks, called "passports," are available to tourists who do not have the room in their luggage to carry home a full-size mask.

Within the last decade, the mask has been appropriated by the Ivoirian state as a symbol of national identity or character. As Duon Sadia, the Ivoirian Minister of Tourism, noted in a 1987 interview: "Because Côte d'Ivoire does not possess pyramids or grand ancient monuments like Egypt or Mexico, and because it does not have an abundance of wildlife like some of the countries in East Africa, Côte d'Ivoire has chosen to promote itself through its only indigenous product. Ivoirian man himself—with his culture and his traditions, of which masks and masking are an integral part" (Bouabré 1987:8). In another interview, the Minister of Tourism further clarified the specific function of masks in the development of the modern Ivoirian polity by noting that, "We now declare that the trademark [of Côte d'Ivoire] will be the mask, for it is representative [of this country], rather pleasing to observe, and enshrouded in an air of mystery. The mask could arouse the curiosity of foreign tourists and lead them to visit our country. We have [therefore] chosen the mask for we believe that it integrates several aspects of our culture and our civilization. The mask encapsulates the traditional arts of Côte d'Ivoire, and represents the strength and history of our nation" (Philmon 1982:13).

The promotion of tourism through the marketing of the image of the mask represents, in point of fact, a radical departure in the rhetoric of the Ivoirian state. Less than a decade before this recent campaign, for example, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, President of the Republic and founder of
independent Côte d'Ivoire, declared to a congress of the National Democratic Party: "We are fed up with having Africa relegated, through the futile gaze of the observer, to a land of sunshine, rhythms, and innocuous folklore" (quoted in Boutillier, Fiéloux and Ormières 1978:5). For Houphouët-Boigny, in his first years of power after independence, both national integration and international economic success were to be found in the promotion of modern industrial technologies rather than in a return to traditionalism or the re-creation of a "primitivist" aesthetic.

Hence, in light of this philosophy, how can one explain the state's recent shift toward traditional cultural resources and, in particular, its appropriation of the wooden mask as a symbol of national, multi-ethnic pride? I would argue that this return to traditionalism is a direct result of the nation's financial collapse following the failure of its cash-crop export economy—beginning sometime in 1980 (Brooke 1988). That is to say, as long as Côte d'Ivoire enjoyed economic prosperity through its production and export of cacao and coffee, the state used its success in the international economy as a device for rallying nationalist sentiment. It needed nothing else. Following the dramatic collapse of the price of cacao and coffee in the world market, however, politicians scrambled to find not only a new source of foreign income but also a new gathering point for nationalist sentiment. The mask was thought to be capable of achieving both. On the one hand, it fueled the Western imagination through its mystery and exotic appeal. On the other hand, it reconciled growing ethnic divisions by elevating the symbolism of the mask—with its plethora of ethnic styles and interpretations—to a single, national icon.

The first attempt by the government of Côte d'Ivoire to promote tourism and national solidarity through the use of wooden masks was the festival of masks held on April 14-15, 1979 in the town of Man, near the Liberian border in the western part of the country. The festival was organized by Bernard Dadié, the Minister of Cultural Affairs. On
the whole, the festival was poorly attended, and it received very little coverage from the Ivorian press (only three short articles in the semi-official daily newspaper *Fraternité Matin*).

The second masked festival was organized by the Minister of Tourism, Duon Sadia. It too was held in the town of Man from February 11-15, 1983. In the second festival at Man, there was a more overt effort on behalf of the government organizers to use the mask as a symbol of Côte d'Ivoire and as a mechanism for attracting the financial benefits of tourism. The masked festival at Man, Duon Sadia noted at a press conference held at the luxurious Hotel Ivoire in Abidjan, “will be the equivalent of Carnival in Rio, with an added element of the profound soul and mystery of ‘non-commercialized’ Africa” (Anonymous 1983:10). The 1983 festival of the masks at Man was again reported by the press to be an overall failure. Very few tourists went to the festival, and the mask-bearers, who felt they were being treated without sufficient respect, boycotted their appearance. A delegation, consisting of three ministers and a representative of the national government, had to plead in public with the masked dancers to come out and perform on the stage (Djidji 1983:11).

The Ivorian state's appropriation of the mask reached its epiphenomenon in the summer of 1988, when the Ministries of Tourism and Culture jointly organized a national masked festival. Promoted under the name “Festimask,” the festival was funded by the state at an estimated cost of $500,000. Unlike previous state-sponsored masked festivals which were organized by district administrations with the exclusive participation of local ethnic groups, the Festimask attempted to bring all the ethnic groups of Côte d'Ivoire into a single event which, not surprisingly, was held in the President’s home town of Yamoussoukro, in the center of the country. The official reason reported in the national newspaper for holding the festival in Yamoussoukro, rather than Man, was because of its proximity to the economic capital and port city of Abidjan—thereby, the argument went, encouraging more expatriates and more tourists to attend the festival of masks. However, the unstated reason for the site of the event, I would argue, was to link the festival of masks and, more generally, the symbolism of masks and masking to the national government through its association with Houphouët-Boigny's natal village and place of retreat.

When the masked festival was moved to Yamoussoukro in 1988, it became not only a vehicle for promoting international tourism, it was also used as a means of stressing national unity. Since the end of the colonial period, many burgeoning African nations have had to push for national unity in the face of internal ethnic factionalism. Although cultural pluralism may be profitable within the realm of the international art market, it is often perceived as a major obstacle in the domain of centralized state politics. As Wallerstein noted in 1960, “The dysfunctional aspects of ethnicity for national integration are obvious. The first is that ethnic groups are still particularistic in their orientation and diffuse in their obligations. . . . The second problem, and one which worries African political leaders more, is separatism, which in various guises is a pervasive tendency in West Africa today” (1960:137-38). Until recently, post-colonial Côte d’Ivoire had a history of successful national integration. In a country made up of approximately sixty different ethnic groups, this record of success is an impressive triumph. One of the reasons which accounts for successful integration of ethnic groups in Côte d'Ivoire is the rapid growth and expansion of the Ivorian economy—the so-called Ivorian “miracle” which took place from 1960 to 1980. Since a majority of Ivorian nationals were reaping the benefits of favorable transnational trade, it was to their (economic) advantage to remain united under a national economic cause (Dozon 1985:53-54). Since the economy has weakened, however, in the past several years, it could be argued that ethnic factionalism has become an increasing concern to the representatives of the centralized Ivorian state. Viewed in this context, then, the masked festival at Yamoussoukro was yet another way of promoting nationalist sentiment in the face of growing ethnic factionalism. The Festimask respected ethnic heterogeneity—i.e., each masked performance was associated with a different and unique ethnic style—while, at the same time, it brought disparate ethnic groups together into a single, united cause.

The Festimask stresses national unity in at least two ways. First, it aims to bring the ethnic distinctions embedded in styles of art into a single “folkloric” category. There are no longer individual ethnic masks. All masks, said the organizers of the festival, are to be thought of as members of the PDCI (Partie Democratique de Côte d'Ivoire). All masks are to be considered Ivorian patriots struggling for the good of the modern nation-state (Gnanang 1987). Secondly, the festival of masks strives to bring the concerns of the older generation (the so-called “mentalités traditionelles” of the rural population) into step with national concerns, such as the promotion of international tourism and the President’s long-standing campaign for West African regional peace. In the context of Festi-
According to Ernest Gellner, there are at least three pre-conditions for the flourishing of state nationalism: (1) that a population be culturally homogenous without internal ethnic groupings, (2) that a population be literate and capable of authoring and propagating its own history, and (3) that a population be anonymous, fluid, mobile, and unmediated in its loyalty to the state (1983:138). International tourism in most of the developing world hinges on the exact opposite criteria from those which underlie the foundation of state nationalism. First, international tourism demands that a population be as culturally and ethnically diverse as possible. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, the tourist art market is driven by the production of a large variety of supposedly autochthonous and stereotyped ethnic arts (cf. Graburn 1984:413). Second, international tourism seeks to discover a population that is illiterate, and without a sense of historical knowledge or a proper understanding of its geographic place within the world system. And third, international tourism calls for the existence of small-scale populations in which there is no anonymity, in which whole societies recognize each and every one of its members, and in which long-distance communication is not possible among putatively isolated groups. In essence, therefore, the demands of state nationalism and the demands of international tourism are situated at opposite poles in the realm of possibilities concerning the individual's relationship to society.

The organization of Festimask was an attempt by the Ivorian government to satisfy simultaneously both the monolithic requirements of effective state nationalism and the polymorphic demands of successful international tourism. By elevating the mask to a national icon, the state was attempting (1) to subvert ethnic differences, (2) to emphasize an indigenous form of national literacy and ethno-historical consciousness, and (3) to create a national category of aesthetic identity through the hidden and anonymous face of the mask. At the same time, however, the state was also trying to encourage international tourism by stressing both the visual diversity in ethnic material productions and the exoticism of the masked dance itself.

Although the aims of the Festimask were both complex and diverse, its results were unambiguous. Both tourists and nationals judged the event as a complete failure. Tourists, on the one hand, stayed away from the Festimask because, I was told by one, they anticipated a large, staged, "tourist" event. Nationals, on the other hand, were disgusted with the Festimask because they felt they had been treated without respect—like pawns in a


mask, the mask is a tool of the modern nation-state that serves "rational" political goals while being presented to both nationals and foreigners as a kind of "traditionalizing instrument" (Moore and Myerhoff 1977:8). At a press conference held to clarify the role of the mask in the nationalist party, the Ivorian Minister of Tourism, Duon Sadia, said:

When we say that the mask must become militant, we mean to signal that the mask must no longer transmit the knowledge of the ancestors in a mechanical way without any explanations. The mask must become a spokesman—communicating in the common language of our culture—for the message of peace. The performance [of Festimask] is not intended to caricature our traditional values, but rather it is aimed to preserve these traditions by adapting them to the exigencies of the modern world. (Bouabré 1987:8)

The Festimask was thus intended to collapse divisions in both space (i.e., ethnic geography) and time (i.e., generational differences).
commercial venture. As one of the elders who attended the Festimask put it to a reporter for the national press, "My son, we went to Yamoussoukro, and we were happy for we had been invited to the village of our President. . . . But you should know that nobody took care of us; nobody even provided us with food, and that just isn't normal. Not only were we not greeted by the organizers of the festival, as is the custom, but when we [finally did get some food] it was their leftovers that we were sent to eat" (Anonymous 1987).

In conclusion, I would argue, the masked festival failed in the eyes of both Ivorian nationals and foreign tourists for the same reason. In both instances, the Festimask was viewed as an inauthentic event because it had been, as it were, too "modern" in its tactics and too insensitive to the demands of "custom." The appropriation of the hidden face by the hidden hand resulted in a particular form of the commodification of ethnicity, in which neither the producers nor the consumers were willing to strike a bargain.

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Notes

1. In order to respect the decree of 14 October 1985 by President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the country name "Côte d'Ivoire" will not be translated into English.
2. The process is also reflected in the use of "traditional" symbols on West African bank notes (Francs CFA) used jointly by nations of former Afrique Occidentale Française (cf. Vogel 1991:233).
3. All translations from the French are by the author.
4. The link between an African festival and the Carnival in Rio was first made by the government of Senegal in 1974 when they tried (without success) to launch a series of "ethnic" dances which "would become as famous as the Carnival of Rio or of Nice" (Copans 1978:119).

References

1987 Communiqué from the Ministry of Information to the Ministry of Tourism. Archives of the Ministry of Tourism, Abidjan.

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