

Narratives of Modernity, Masculinity, and Citizenship Amid Crisis in Abidjan's *Sorbonne*

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Abstract: In this article I relate prominent depictions of the African urban crisis, particularly informality, and its implications for masculine subjectivity in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Drawing on five months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in 2008 and 2009, I consider the *Sorbonne*, a nationalist space in Abidjan, where partisans of former President Laurent Gbagbo contested the crisis narrative and their place in it. Literally and ideologically, *Sorbonne* orators and spectators moved themselves and their country from the periphery to the urban and global core.

Résumé: Dans cet article, je rapporte des représentations bien connues de la crise urbaine en Afrique, en particulier l'informalité, et ses implications pour la subjectivité masculine à Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. En me basant sur cinq mois de recherche ethnographique que j'ai menée entre 2008 et 2009, j'examine la *Sorbonne*, un espace nationaliste à Abidjan, où les partisans de l'ancien président Laurent Gbagbo ont contesté la narrative de la crise et leur place dans cette crise. Littéralement et idéologiquement, les orateurs et les spectateurs de la *Sorbonne* ont placé leur pays, ainsi qu'eux-mêmes, de la périphérie vers le centre urbain et mondial.

Keywords: African urban crisis, feminization of work, informality, masculinity, modernity

The African Crisis City and the Feminization of Work

As the place where the *colon* [colonist] afforded citizenship, the Francophone African city was the core of the *mission civilisatrice*. Urban segregation was qualified, with Europeans allowing the residencies of African *évolué* who approximated them in livelihood and lifestyle.¹ Oppositional relations between core and periphery linger in the postcolonial city, and are exacerbated in the context of *crisis*²—a term that portrays African urbanity as distinct from a normative way that urbanities elsewhere live and work. Roitman (2012) writes that crisis is “constituted as an object of knowledge”, one that “implies a certain telos—that is, it is inevitably though most often implicitly directed toward a norm”.

In Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire's economic and cultural center and largest city with an estimated population of slightly over 4 million (United Nations Population Division 2009), the crisis narrative has involved a reinterpretation of what it means to be Abidjanais. Designated the “Paris of West Africa” and the epicenter of a *miracle Ivoirien* for the initial quarter century after achieving independence in 1960, booming, cosmopolitan Abidjan stood apart from the political unrest and economic malaise otherwise troubling the region. To fully embody an Abidjanais identity entailed being something other than African: the alterity of the French

colonizer (Newell 2009). The city itself acted as the go-to destination for both migrant laborers from the poorer north and neighboring countries who comprised a quarter of the workforce (Sandbrook 1985), as well as French expatriate personnel who appeared in higher numbers after independence than before (Crook 1989). Abidjan's social imaginary reflected this status such that Abidjanais thought of their territory as a "stepping stone" between Africa and the West (Newell 2009:179). In such a context, expectations of normative urbanity placed Abidjanais in a precarious position of in-betweenness, treading an aspired French sociality and a denigrated migrant underclass. Work in particular comprised heavy nationalist overtones. City life embraced a "moral economy and imaginaries valorizing careers of salaried work and educational capital" within a social division of labor so that the civil servant or "DG" (director general) personified the modern Ivoirian man (Banégas 2007:28, author's translation). The state being the predominant employer of the new modern economy, Côte d'Ivoire was dubbed the "civil servant republic" (Crook 1989:216). Still today many Abidjanais will explain that dignified work involves arriving at one's air-conditioned office in a suit and tie. By contrast, backwards less-than-citizens—northerners have had their belonging questioned in equal measure with regional immigrants with whom they share much in common—toiled away in *petits métiers*: trades largely confined to the informal economy (Matlon 2011; Newell 2005, 2009).

Such citizenship hierarchies ranked *men*. When European colonizers instituted an economic and ideological infrastructure in the African city, wages fell strictly within the man's domain. As the colonial economy increasingly subsumed indigenous society the wage became a pre-requisite to marriage and thus to a dominant masculine status (Agadjanian 2005; Cooper 2003; Ferguson 1999; Hunter 2010; Lindsay 2003a, 2003b; Silberschmidt 2005). Meanwhile, women's participation in the informal economy "largely paved the way for alternative forms of accumulation" in the city (Simone 2004:173). "[I]n the context of an entrenched patriarchal gender hierarchy...for men, formal sector jobs constitute not only the most appropriate and desirable type of work, but also part of their masculine status" (Agadjanian 2005:261).

The social and economic consequences of sustained crisis have made this spatial-temporal (cosmopolitan, modern) vision of the *évolué* untenable, even for those Ivoirians whose familial background and educational attainment would have positioned them well a generation ago. The "civil servant republic" is now the "*Rue publique*" [public street] (Banégas 2007:46), with 75% of Abidjan's working population involved in the informal economy (Union Économique et Monétaire Ouest-Africaine 2001–2002).³ Rising informality is one aspect of the *feminization of work*. Among other things, this alludes to increasingly insecure working conditions, traditionally conferred to women whose labor was treated as secondary (Roy 2003). Despite the absence of alternatives, the normative expectation that men and citizens participate in the formal economy persists alongside the stigma of informal work and men struggle to affirm themselves in this context. Moreover, with *la crise Ivoirienne* supplanting *le miracle Ivoirien* it is no longer clear that Abidjan holds a special place in the West African region. In Côte d'Ivoire, the crisis discourse has revolved around the predicaments of being citizen and civilized, identities inseparable from nation and capital.

This article explores one response to undermined Abidjanais masculinities involving the autochthonous politicization of crisis states (see Gerschiere and Nyamnjoh 2001). Across sub-Saharan Africa spaces that allow men to assert non-productive yet affirming masculinities have become commonplace, from the concert stage or football field to the oft-politicized “street parliament” (for the latter, see the 2012 special edition of *Politique Africaine*). In Abidjan, the entangled and disrupted meanings of man, citizen, and modernity itself came together at the *Sorbonne*, a street parliament in central Abidjan.⁴ *Sorbonne* activities began with the transition to multiparty politics in the late 1980s but had become decidedly in favor of then-President Laurent Gbagbo by 2004. Upon the resolution of post-electoral conflict from 2010 to 2011, with President Alassane Ouattara gaining formal and *de facto* control of Abidjan, Ouattara supporters razed the *Sorbonne* structure.

At the *Sorbonne*, partisans of former President Gbagbo contested the crisis narrative and their own threatened masculinities. It was a protected space for pro-Gbagbo autochthons to enact a fantasized masculinity, a hyperbole of masculinity whereby modernity was, embracing the right narratives and appurtenances, embodied. Drawing on 5 months of ethnographic fieldwork attending the *Sorbonne* for half-day periods two to four times a week between November 2008 and April 2009 and followed up by in-depth interviews with two ticket-takers and 18 of its most prominent orators and other insiders, I demonstrate how literally and ideologically, *Sorbonne* orators and spectators moved themselves and their country from the periphery to the urban and global core. Underemployed men, spectators and orators filled otherwise idle time with *Sorbonne* activity. In speech, comportment and interpersonal relationship regulars engaged in rhetoric of nationalism, social critique and misogyny that affirmed their value as men in the city and as Ivoirians in the world.

African Modernity: Deficiency and Deviation

Scholarship on the African urban crisis has either highlighted how the African experience is deficient to an idealized modernity, or explained it as a deviation, embracing some variation of the “alternative” modernities perspective which Roy (2001:11) describes as constantly contesting hegemony and subverting any singular ideal. In their classic account of deficiency, Mbembe and Roitman (1995:323–324) describe the *crisis city*—in their case Yaoundé, Cameroon—as “acute economic depression, the chain of upheavals and tribulations, instabilities, fluctuations and ruptures of all sorts.” Other prominent accounts of African crisis cities include Lagos (Davis 2006), Kinshasa (de Boeck and Plissart 2004) and the Zambian Copperbelt (Ferguson 1999). Ferguson (1999:166–206) argues that urbanity is as much a myth as the modernization narrative that accompanied it, a myth that included “expectations of domesticity” involving a sexual division of labor with productive men and reproductive women. In this reading, modernity was almost realized during a brief post-independence moment when a growing economy appeared natural if not inevitable. But with the feminization of work a central facet of the crisis, African modernity is deficient because it is incapable of providing those things that (non-feminized) work ought to: a living wage, a

cohesive family, a career, opportunity, or dignity. It renders man and city deficient because it remains an aspired yet unrealizable goal.

Proponents of a deviation perspective, however, contest normative evaluations of African urbanity. They argue that posing everyday urban strategies as deficient to a teleological narrative decontextualizes the African experience, and note how the colonial state's attempt at order was also a mechanism of control (Rabinow 1995; Scott 1998). As such, informality is consistent with long-term practices whereby survival grates against oppressive colonial logics (Simone 2004). In this sense, Mbembe and Nutall (2004:364–365) call Johannesburg an “other modernity” of the mine and the migrant worker who experiences the city as “radical uncertainty, unpredictability, and insecurity”, within which a “parallel economy—informal and transnational—has emerged.” Simone (2010) posited that the periphery has engendered new ways of being in the city that exposes both great struggle and creative response, the latter a reservoir of potentiality. In this reading modernity, pliable, is in a constant state of becoming. Informality is deviant because it resists rules that men hold one role and women another, that “work” can be neatly incorporated into a modernizing project; informality is not backward slippage but a contiguous state rendering man and city deviant.

Cooper (2005:149) argues that “What is lost on opposing European capitalist imperialist ‘modernity’ to ‘alternative modernities’ or spaces of the nonmodern is the boundary-crossing struggle over the conceptual and moral bases of political and social organization.” Portrayals of deficiency emphasize the failures of the modernist project and continued unequal relations between core and periphery. They reveal the fact that “modernity” as a project and a discourse is political (Ferguson 1999). Deviation proponents have nonetheless put forth critical analyses that, beyond celebrating African difference, examine how alternate ways of being in the city emerged out of survivalist imperatives which contested duplicitous regulation under the colonial-African city.

These accounts of African urbanity as deficient or deviant underscore important aspects of colonialist-capitalist power structures and their contestation on the part of everyday African city dwellers. The aspirational fact of the deficiency narrative elucidates complicity to the modernization project, while the deviation narrative underscores elements of resistance. Yet both depictions highlight the peripheral character of African urbanism. In contemporary Abidjan, instead of the French metropolitan expanding to the periphery as once expected, the livelihoods of the periphery have “encroached” upon the core (cf Bayat 2004). It is a feminization of the city and the strategies men adopt to survive. Given the distance between what Abidjan presumed itself to be and what it now is, individuals struggle to define the modern and their place within it. The rise of informal livelihoods leaves Abidjanais men in search of how to assert the dominant masculine identities of yesteryear. In providing a gendered analysis of an urban phenomenon, I examine ways men embody modern masculinities despite the crisis.

Constructing Masculine Subjectivities at the *Sorbonne*: Periphery in the Core

Plateau, Abidjan's urban core, remains a potent symbol of the *miracle Ivoirien*. Abidjan's bygone splendor remains impressively intact, with tree-lined boulevards

accommodating high-end boutiques, five-star hotels and glittering buildings headquartering government bureaus, international banks and development organizations. Informal practices still appear out of place. Most administrative business requires a trip to Plateau from one of the many outlying communes, or *quartiers populaires*, and each visit reinforces the notion that Abidjan maintains the modernity sought “elsewhere”, somewhere outside African borders (see Diouf 2005:231). However, claims to Plateau are full of messy residuals concerning the *évolué* identity. Abidjan's lighter shades still dominate this core, and all but the elite make transient appearances as low-end workers, street hustlers or visitors wandering about the district like wide-eyed country folk.

Above a major commercial center offering *haute couture* clothing and top-of-the-line electronics is an advertisement for an elite jewelry designer. The viewer faces an elegant, statuesque black woman in a slinky evening gown. She fingers an extraordinary diamond necklace that her beau, rich as he is adoring, places around her neck. He is a handsome white man in a fine tux. This advertisement plays equally to the fantasy of the white male expatriate who scores more than a business deal on his trip to Africa as it does to the ambitious, glamorous young Ivoirian woman who frequents forbiddingly expensive clubs where potential boyfriends with means—often white male clientele—may be found. The Ivoirian man is distinctly absent.

Across the road and down the street another racialized trope is at play. Situated at the *Sorbonne's* main entrances, a mass of vendors sell pirated electronic and print media featuring hard pornography. Adorned in a thong, a close-up of a large, round, black behind makes it appear larger and rounder. Passersby gape at full-frontal views of massive black penises penetrating platinum blonde white women. These images appear like revenge for a colonial history that gave black men secondary access to black women's bodies and denied them access altogether to white women's bodies.

Like the grating contrast between these shady images and the authoritative billboard whose content replicates a colonialist order, the *Sorbonne* was in Plateau but not of Plateau. The men who frequented the space insisted on their own centrality despite carrying with them the tropes, practices and discourses from the periphery as unspoken admissions of tentative belonging.

The *Sorbonne*

The Sorbonne as a Space

The *Sorbonne* was a site of knowledge production and dissemination in Plateau where politically astute nationalist men representing President Gbagbo utilized the Ivoirian geopolitical terrain to situate themselves in a local and regional hierarchy. Literally and ideologically they centered themselves, constructing a status-bearing masculine subjectivity within the core of the former colonial city, and manipulating the colonial and postcolonial narrative to their advantage. The spectators and insiders involved in making the *Sorbonne* function were part of a larger network of *patriotes* regulating access to the Ivoirian state and constructing the appropriate autochthonous Abidjanais subject. It was a means

for these “social juniors to take power by imposing themselves in the public sphere as a political category in their own right” (Banégas 2006b:545). The *Sorbonne* embodied both the crisis and its nationalist response, at the heart of which was a contest of belonging to the city, the country, and the world.

The *Sorbonne* was conceived as a forum for free speech amidst the decline of one-party rule in the 1980s. Initially in a public park adjacent to its present location, men gathered and spoke their minds about anything: society, the economy, religion, and politics. As it gained structure, the *Sorbonne* conferred degrees to its sanctioned “professors”. By the turn of the century the *Sorbonne* had settled into a permanent, regulated space: a city block taken over by a market selling goods aimed at its primarily male clientele at the heart of which stood an abandoned high-rise. Vendors and their goods reflected the barter style of informal markets in the *quartiers populaires* and not Plateau’s otherwise formal, enclosed shops. Additional stalls set up at the base of the abandoned building and upper levels were used as offices for *Sorbonne* leadership, and speaking areas were situated at two sides of the building. In this gritty market atmosphere the periphery encroached upon the core. Open from 10 am until 6 pm on weekdays, on any given it day attracted dozens to hundreds of spectators: Abidjanais in town for administrative business, working bureaucrats on their lunch break, students,⁵ and a hodgepodge population of unemployed.

The Sorbonne as a Strategy: Politics, Poverty, and Penises

After the 1999 *coup d’état* and civil war in 2002, President Gbagbo and his party the *Front Populaire Ivoirien* (FPI) began to use the *Sorbonne* as a vehicle for street-level propaganda. Here, “professors” and other “orators”, designated within Gbagbo’s hierarchical “patriotic galaxy” found a place to keep busy and be heard. Of the 18 orators I interviewed, all but four had university educations, and seven had or were in school for advanced degrees. Nevertheless 14 were chronically unemployed and treated their “patriotic speech like a veritable trade” (Cutolo and Banégas 2012:23, author’s translation), finding sporadic work through their *Sorbonne* contacts. Three of the four employed had found their jobs through this network. Every Ivoirian with whom I spoke at the *Sorbonne* was unmarried.

While orators described it as a space of “free expression”, they also spoke openly of its mission to support the state in the context of the northern “rebellion”. As a *political strategy*, the *Sorbonne* constructed narratives of belonging that positioned Christian, Gbagboist, southern Ivoirians as the appropriate citizen. It constructed a *we* of “patriots”, “resistors”, “brothers”, and “friends” powerful by association and united in a struggle to claim the country from *them*: inauthentic Ivoirians and a resource-greedy French-led international community. For its public it narrated current events locally and globally, inserting Côte d’Ivoire and Gbagbo into the center of international affairs. As men who presented these narratives as insider perspectives, they portrayed the organization and its spectators as privileged members of a global scene. In doing so they gave men, many of whom had little else to do in their day, an affirming sense of self-importance and inclusion into a

wider nexus of current events. Cynically, Arnaut (2012:23) writes that the *Sorbonne* and its affiliates were “examples of youthful political bluff involving a dozen or so junior political leaders”. However, Cutolo and Banégas (2012:37, author’s translation) argue that “By their privileged insertion in the...patriotic galaxy, they act as authorized interpreters of power and its double.” Irrespective of how truly connected they were to circuits of power, they enacted dominant identities with politics at its heart.

The *Sorbonne* was also a space of *sociability* and *social critique*. Even while it purported to center men physically and politically, orators related to their audience with the shared experiences of seeking work, deep poverty and struggle. In these “universities of free time” (Banégas 2010:38, author’s translation), they lamented chronic unemployment, humorously related stories about life on the periphery and angrily beseeched spectators to contribute to their *gbaka* [local bus] fare home: 200FCFA.⁶ They hawked booklets on business entrepreneurship and referred to the *Sorbonne* as a community, collecting fees for sick members and discussing strategies of collective investment. To the best of each one’s ability, orators and spectators presented themselves as men who belonged in Plateau. Yet despite its rhetorical solidarity, hierarchies separated those who authentically belonged—upper-level membership, bureaucrats and other employed men, *doyens* [deans]—from the others.

Lastly, the *Sorbonne* was a *men’s* space. Orators, regulars, and gawkers were overwhelmingly men. The majority of women present were silent, there as backdrops to the almost exclusively male clientele. It was a site that articulated masculinities set to approximate the hegemonic businessman in dress and comportment, and inculcated this ideal among junior men. In line with Gbagboist economics it valorized national and individual ascension through private enterprise, individual initiative and self-realization (Banégas 2007:28). Gendered imaginaries of citizenship associated masculinity with risk-taking, intellectual excellence, and respectable self-presentation (Banégas et al 2012:16–19). In speeches and advertisements orators and vendors addressed the male subject. Its nationalist discourse was infused with misogynist symbolism explicitly linking penises and politics, affirming the masculine character of the African state (Mouiche 2008) and generally mimicking the “fixation of elite Africans on the ‘consumption of women’ as a privileged attribute of phallic domination” (Biaya 2001:77, author’s translation). Such hegemonic-misogynist discourse contested the fact that, in reality, the unemployment crisis had left men increasingly incapable of controlling many aspects of their lives, including women. Where elsewhere in Plateau they might be rendered invisible, the *Sorbonne* enabled peripheral men to assert a semblance of prominence as public figures, informed and formalized.

The *Sorbonne* construction of masculine subjectivity was one way for men to contest their powerlessness as wage-less men. Moreover, in accessing Plateau and asserting a narrative of Côte d’Ivoire and in particular Abidjan as a city within the global core, the *Sorbonne* became a vehicle to contest the failures of modernity. It offered men a space to define an exclusionary Ivorian citizenship while still acknowledging their struggles and recognizing internal hierarchies. In short, men reclaimed their status as the appropriate protagonists in a modern, global Abidjan.

The Women

Nevertheless a great number of women were also present, working food and drink stalls, squatting over basins of hot oil frying fish and *allico* [plantains], and peddling large plates of snacks and refreshments balanced on their heads. In the early morning when workers assembled benches and cockroaches scattered freely, the *Sorbonne* belonged to women in *pagne* [traditional African fabric] wraps. They tied their undernourished infants to their backs while unkempt children ran about with no intention of going to school. During these off-hours, the *Sorbonne* belonged to women and children. Contrasted to Plateau's elite stiletto-strutting women, these scenes of reproductive labor exposed the *Sorbonne's* peripheral status, the feminine face of poverty in the center of Abidjan's proud bastion of steel-and-concrete modernity.

Politics: Manufacturing a Global–Local Nexus *Global Nation, Global Leader, and Global Everyday Man*

As a site of knowledge production, the *Sorbonne* reconstructed global and local affairs to generate its own truths in speeches, pamphlets, and electronic media. All domestic affairs had an international dimension, and Côte d'Ivoire headlined world news. Orators based Ivoirian centrality on lore of unprecedented resource wealth, the international community's object of desire. Thus amidst the global financial crisis of 2008 pamphlets explained how the Ivoirian crisis was pivotal to destabilizing France's economy. The American International Group (AIG) disaster on Wall Street involved the Ivoirian economy. One orator explained that with their virtual economies crumbling, the global North eyed Ivoirian resource wealth with renewed greed. When Israeli forces bombed the Gaza strip in late 2008 spectators were reminded of a post-Independence history of unimpeded Ivoirian–Israeli relations, even when other African countries had expelled Israeli embassies. During Pope Benedict's 2009 African tour orators accused the Vatican of being at the root of nefarious activity resulting in global economic inequality. One linked this to the pontiff's decision to bypass Côte d'Ivoire, home of the world's largest basilica.

Sorbonne discourse commonly situated President Gbagbo in a global context. Thus albeit the reality of Ivoirian lives being largely left on hold, Gbagbo vindicated peripheral identities through his attention, and reception, by the global community.⁷ So when Barack Obama won the 2008 United States presidential race orators emphasized his deep friendship with Gbagbo. And they reported that he was the sole world leader on close terms with both Obama and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. France, they said, was Gbagbo's only foe. Speeches and pamphlets made much ado of Gbagbo's election as "Vice President of the International Follow-up Conference on the Financing of Development" at the 2008 Doha Summit. Without fail, orators boasted that Gbagbo was at the forefront of a global anti-imperial movement, resisting French monopoly control and acting as role model to the continent's weaker regimes. One orator reported that former South African President Nelson Mandela had singled him out as Africa's next figurehead. Notable across these instances was their praise of Gbagbo via manufactured narratives of international esteem.

The global orientation of much of the information disseminated at the *Sorbonne* was made true by virtue of spectators' inability to verify: how their president was received internationally was not something the average man could fact check. As "political analysts", orators claimed to educate the public, and merged familiar facts of French neocolonialism with un-sourced statistics on Ivoirian wealth and behind-the-scenes knowledge of rebel and extra-national affairs. Many orators sensationalized events by adding a religious or spiritual dimension to their accounts; they commonly referred to Côte d'Ivoire as the Chosen Nation, a new Israel on the verge of realizing its destiny.⁸

Orators framed audience contributions as part of the war effort so that the more a man gave, the more patriotic he proved himself.⁹ Their recounts of the major events to shake the nation's sense of tranquility took on a cathartic effect. In reliving these communal experiences, they added their insider perspectives. Moreover, they constantly insisted that a new development was unfolding. The orators said their information came from top men in the legal and illegal worlds of Ivoirian and international activity that circulated around a shadowy Abidjan. This made them, and the audience members with whom they divulged information, privy insiders to all things classified.

In one particularly gripping speech, an orator described the inner workings of an attempted breakout from Abidjan's main prison. It had been big news for about a week. He insinuated United Nations support of the anti-Gbagbo rebellion: explaining that 200 prisoners had been poised to fight, he related their breakout attempt to a recent United Nations visit (on the pretext of inspecting prison conditions). The orator described where the conspiring rebels were hiding. Giving his report a sense of nearness to the event and to the crowd, he provided the escape route as one would instruct a friend taking a taxi home, citing familiar landmarks such as pharmacies and petrol stations. He warned that this had been a close call, a serious attempt to take Abidjan overnight, and closed with the ominous statement that rebels were here in their midst, covering as fellow patriots. For men accustomed to life on Abidjan's periphery, the *Sorbonne* offered a space and a script to imagine another reality, one in which their country and president were global players.

Entitled Insiders

Orator: If you are Ivoirian, clap! [Audience applauds.] Now if you have Ivoirian citizenship, clap! [Audience applauds louder.]¹⁰

In the Ivoirian social geography, being of the south (particularly Abidjanais) was synonymous with being Ivoirian while northerners often shared the characteristics of migrant populations, such as ethnicity, diet, religion, language, or name. In a context of contested nationality, southern Gbagboists took on the label of "patriot". Others were not only outsiders but potential enemies of the state. The *Sorbonne* was the epicenter of this autochthonous logic, and orators passionately advocated narrowed conceptions of who deserved to profit from the *miracle Ivoirien*. There men asserted a privileged belonging accorded by indigeneity while in everyday reality "authentic" Ivoirians struggled alongside migrants to earn their daily bread.

During a 2008 attempt at voter registration, also an effort to discern who was and was not Ivoirian, the *Sorbonne* sold pamphlets with photocopies of men's identity cards. The guilty parties bore duplicate names with different faces, or the same faces and names but one card claiming Ivoirian origin, another Malian. This was proof of extra-nationals stealing Ivoirian citizenship and attempting to participate in domestic politics. Speeches directly associated rebels with foreigners so that the solution to the crisis was to retake the country from both the neocolonial French and illegitimate migrants. Orators prayed to the Lord and thanked Jesus—Christianity being the dominant religion of the South—always invoking *hallelujahs* from the crowd. They cracked jokes about Muslim customs or poor northerners with their arid, infertile terrain. They spoke with derision of the foreign and unclean foods these others ate, like couscous and *garba* [fish with *attiéké*, a grain-like cassava]. One orator teased about how migrants travel to Bouaké, the northern rebel stronghold: 22 people in seats, another 22 in the luggage space. The man who travels like this, he concluded, is the same man who robs you at night.

Some orators couched xenophobic remarks—foreigners are welcome so long as they know their place—with statements attesting to Ivoirian hospitality, *ipso facto* its high foreigner populations. Others were more blatant, saying that under the first President Félix Houphouët-Boigny the country had been sold to foreigners and President Gbagbo intended to retake it for his people. Ivoirians, one stated, must begin making the country's decisions; foreigners could agree or leave. He listed the foreign countries by name: Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Liberia.

Poverty: *Sorbonne* Sociality and Social Critique

A full hierarchy was at play at the *Sorbonne* among staff and audience. Authentic- and inauthentic-looking businessmen came for hours at a time to listen and socialize. It was a place to be, or at least look, busy. In speeches, orators presented the *Sorbonne* as an internationally recognized information platform, where national and international media sought local insight and truth. The big decisions may not have been made there, but in the least the *Sorbonne* was a definitive feature of the ground-level Ivoirian political scene, and patriotic elite assembled among a generalized consortium of Gbagboists. Yet despite their shared membership, men upheld distinctions that existed outside.

Elite audience members rubbed shoulders with *Sorbonne* leadership. While making rare, discreet appearances in the main speaking area, these elite came to talk business and politics with certain higher-ups, often in the preferred *maquis* [outdoor bar] near one of the market entrances. They typically consisted of upper-level members of Gbagbo's formal (government, business leaders) and informal patriotic network: a generalized consortium of *Jeunes Patriotes* [Young Patriots] that included a student organization, militants, and *Sorbonne* insiders. The *Sorbonne* being a liminal space, these members represented the potentiality of its affiliation for men who faced few opportunities otherwise. The most successful orators had hopes of crossing over, working their way up the network of patriotic leadership, or finding formal work through these contacts. Their exposure also allowed them to move between the fictive world of *Sorbonne* knowledge

production and the world of local media, making appearances at ministerial functions and rubbing shoulders with the upper echelons of Abidjan society.

Lowest on the pecking order of *Sorbonne* workers were women vendors and pre-teen shoe shiners. Above them were pamphleteers, often teenagers, sometimes making an effort to present themselves but just as often in torn shirts and broken sandals. Ticket-takers followed: 20- and 30-something men varying in self-presentation. Finally, the master of ceremonies and orators treated their gigs with the dignified dress and comportment of an office job.

The orators, though self-described as unemployed and unequivocally among everyday Ivoirians with few readily available opportunities, nonetheless treaded a nebulous middle ground with a regular audience affording them local renown and the numbers of an occasional government minister or company director registered in their mobile phones. While unlikely, these men harbored hopes that their public activities and regime loyalty would launch careers in government or the private sector.

Sorbonne leadership was composed of men of realizable political ambition who had lunched with ministers. When appearing among the orators their high status was obvious, and the latter offered their chairs and exhibited other signs of deference, such as being dutifully greeted by name and title at the start of a talk. Usually, however, such men were too involved behind the scenes to grace their publics. At the *Sorbonne* they could be found in their offices in the partially abandoned high-rise. To reach the President's office one climbed a dingy staircase reeking of urine; there a long line of a broad public waited: dignified men in suits, tired-looking women vendors, nervous teenagers. Some came to resolve a dispute, others to discuss some pressing private matter, present a case for financial support, or make a plea for work. Several well dressed men, all from the loyal inner circle, sat on couches in the waiting room. The President was usually poised regally in his office, surrounded by more insiders with, for what he insisted was transparency's sake, the door always open. He referred to himself by *nous*, the French royal "we".

Despite these distinctions orators emphatically articulated a common *us* against foreign threats. In fact, the larger *Sorbonne* community united not by their commonalities but by what distinguished them: the stated constant, nefarious threats from outsiders bent on devastating the country. In a speech picking up the common theme of stalled elections, an orator described France and the United Nations as "collaborators", an undesired presence there not to mitigate but to manipulate political outcomes. He added that Ivoirians were already *évolué*, fully capable of crafting their fate. Another described how President Gbagbo had for years put up with former French President Jacques Chirac calling him "Laurent" instead of his formal (and respectful) title. His conciliatory behavior was over. In similar ways the *Sorbonne* enabled men to counter their peripheral identities, attesting to their status as *évolué*, informed, important, and commanding respect. In framing the *Sorbonne* as a site on the forefront of global affairs and its audience members as privileged participants, orators oscillated between appealing to the audience's construed self-image and reality: that the majority of the men were in fact deeply peripheral. Authentic businessmen and political insiders, however, held a coveted place apart. They were easily identified and others gave them the recognition

befitting a *big man* in African society, thereby upholding reverential status systems that have otherwise eroded in the context of the crisis.

Regulars arrived finely dressed. Sitting with legs crossed, they half-listened to speeches while engaged in the morning paper. Signaling participation in the buzz of greater Plateau, a man might come with a briefcase in hand and commission a ragged pre-teen to shine his shoes. The act preceded its function so that men with rubber or canvas shoes demanded the service alongside those wearing leather. I watched one man fuss angrily over the boy getting his soles perfectly white. Female vendors sold water and juice sachets, bags of peanuts, and other snack products. An espresso vendor circled the speaking area with a large thermos, providing men with dainty blue matching cups and saucers, and stirring their sugar on demand. Selling boiled eggs, another woman would squat deferentially before her client and peel his egg as he looked past her, absorbed in conversation or a newspaper.

These rituals added to a sense of entitlement and self-importance yet remained affordable: peanuts and water cost 20FCFA each, a shoe shine 100FCFA. The charge for seating was similarly within reach. Ticket-takers sat out white plastic chairs closest to the speakers for 100FCFA at the request of doyens or *parents*. Less expensive bench seats cost half (50FCFA), and the general public typically sat in these. But as testament to the deep poverty of these spectators, arguments often ensued with ticket-takers over loiterers grudgingly ordered out of their places of momentary rest. Others, the *jeunesse* [youth] stood in the back, free of charge.

Encouraging a neoliberal business mentality, orators speckled their talks with rhetoric proclaiming that economic independence begins with the individual, often segueing into advertisements for how-to start-up pamphlets which sold to a public interested in entrepreneurialism. Its introduction noted that everyone in America wants to work in the private sector. They contrasted the preferable Anglophone business mentality to a lethargic Francophone state dependency. Africa's poverty, one orator explained, was due to its people's poverty of thought and risk aversion.

Other pamphlets featured contact information for various embassies—Japan, Germany, India, Israel—on the pretext that they would support sound business initiatives and provide information for obtaining visas. Special guests discussed investment opportunities and the master of ceremonies made occasional announcements for available properties throughout Abidjan. Once I arrived at the end of a promotional question-and-answer session for a credit cooperative. The speaker explained in detail how to make payments in installments, and used the self-contained Lebanese expatriate community as a model of successful collaboration. This man's large entourage included two intimidating bodyguards. Captivated audience members peppered him with questions after the talk had ended.¹¹

Despite these masquerades of bourgeois status and business activity, many an orator related to his audience with a shared narrative of life lived on the periphery. In his opening salutations one orator greeted first the higher-ups, then the unemployed. He described how the crisis had put men's lives on hold: a man of 20 at the time of the *coup* was now 27, just 3 years from 30. He repeated this for a man of 40. Spectators nodded in solemn agreement. In this way he constructed a narrative that collapsed sustained economic crisis into the civil conflict, imposing

blame for both on the rebels, and resolution by way of conflict-ending elections (anticipating Gbagbo's victory). Another orator contrasted the argot of the core *communes* of Cocody and Plateau with the *quartiers populaires* Yopougon and Abobo: the former, privileged and civilized, used the verb "nourish" while the poorer and more primitive latter simply "eat".

One orator concluded that life without money was worthless. To be happy and poor, he said, was to be an imbecile. Even in death money matters: a rich man's "body" is different from a dead man's "cadaver". He compared the behavior of a dog in Yopougon or Abobo who competed for dinner with his equally hungry owner, to one in Cocody so confident of a steady meal that he would sit still with food under his nose. Finally, this orator described what happens when a poor man tries to speak to a woman. Too shy, he follows her, faintly calling out to catch her attention. When she turns around, fear renders him speechless. Resigned, he tells her that he mistook her for a cousin. A rich man on the other hand just asks a woman to join him for a meal. At the word "food" he has spiked her interest. In this speech the orator equated poverty with stupidity, animality, fear and humiliation. Setting out Abidjan's socioeconomic terrain he established that dogs in center-city *communes* lived better than men on the periphery. Amidst deep poverty, a rich man could appeal to a woman by offering not to adorn her with luxuries, but to feed her—a basic need that nonetheless a poor man could not.

At the end of a talk spectators demonstrated appreciation as well as relative means by throwing money to the center; those offering paper notes strode confidently to the speaker to whom they handed it directly.¹² But mostly 50FCFA and 100FCFA coins tinkled in, and donations petered out nearing the end of the month when salaries had been exhausted. Then a master of ceremonies might pace the area for 10 minutes or more, refusing to move to the next speaker until the crowd of a few hundred collectively relinquished 1000FCFA, purportedly for the man's "taxi ride" home (most in fact rode *gbakas*). Those who gave impressively were sure to have their donation graciously acknowledged with a hand shake, reference to being a gentleman or a *doyen*, and the applause of impressed fellow audience members. And men who appeared to have been in Plateau on genuine business were specific targets with refrains like, "I see you are coming from work. God bless you, you must have something to give."

Frustrated by the poor contribution record, orators often asked derisively how spectators could afford the *gbaka* ride into Plateau but have nothing for them. One irately emphasized that this was his job; were he doing something else he would be unable to "inform" the public as he did. Thus he too deserved a salary. Another sarcastically thanked the crowd for their donations, remarking that he was earning no more than a Burkinabé.

Penises: Men and Misogyny

Kaffa: At the *Sorbonne* we talk politics, but politics is about penises ... The penis is power. When your wife denies you it means you have not been elected.

In this space where men claimed centrality for themselves and their country, they imprinted the space and the political world as masculine. Women were in their proper place, in traditional dress and in service to the men working and patronizing the *Sorbonne*. Enacting what they perceived to be normative gendered behaviors, the *Sorbonne* was both a masculine and misogynist space with men at the center and women at the periphery of a projected Abidjanais sociality. Once during a speech a woman walked across the open speaking area and was quickly subjected to verbal abuse from insiders and audience members; I had never seen male offenders elicit the same response. And while I frequently saw shoe shiners or pamphleteers take brief rests in empty seats I only once saw a woman vendor take such liberty.

Men sought to embody the businessman's refined masculinity. Instilling these values to their younger peers and social juniors, higher-ups gave fatherly tips to younger *protégés* on the appropriate way to wear a suit and behave with dignity and style.¹³ One, for example, explained to a man that although he was well adorned, the two expensive-looking phones he had bunched in his pocket ruined the line of his jacket. To the audience's applause, orators decried *maquis* culture where men dressed in low-riding pants with their backsides exposed and spent their money on *drogbas* [1-liter Bock Solibra beers named after Ivorian football hero Didier Drogba]. By contrast they insisted that a man's role as a political patriot entailed investing in the national economy, at the *Sorbonne* but also in private business development. The models provided at the *Sorbonne* were "respectable", titular identities that suggested learning, such as "professor", "doctor" and "master", or political-organizational status, such as "governor", "secretary" and "president".¹⁴ In displays of fatherhood, occasionally a proud audience member would attend with his young son seated on his lap; women and men alike gathered to coddle the boy. Word of a newborn child received hearty congratulations between speeches.

There were, however, more often inauthentic businessmen whose suits appeared tethered and poorly fitting. At the insiders' *maquis* I met a number of interesting figures. The frequent incorporation of religion into speeches justified the presence of the *Sorbonne* "mystic", attired in a red plaid shirt covered in *Looney Toons* cartoons. Another man resembled a caricature of the deep American South with an oversized cowboy hat and a toothpick protruding from his mouth. To accommodate his oversized suit he wore his pants high on his waist such that the behind sagged awkwardly. Another man wore a tattered green Mao suit under which was an almost-transparent white undershirt.

Around noon, speakers broke for traditional medicine advertisements. Vendors adjacent to the speaking area sold a range of concoctions: one woman peddled a soap to regenerate one's self-esteem and financial wellbeing. She promised that after washing, job-seekers would be job-finders, and reported that she herself had come across 3 million FCFA. Some sold cures for AIDS and other chronic maladies. Attesting to the credibility of his potions and pomades one vendor boasted a Brit and an Irishman among his clientele. To the crowd's delight, vendors acted out scenes as they promoted pills guaranteeing increased sexual potency or sperm count, or creams to augment the penis, breast or behind. One promised her

medicine would “break the bed”. Another brought to stage a satisfied customer; as he approached the vendor commented on how much space the client now needed in his pants to accommodate his enhanced member.

Selling medicines on the side, the most popular speaker held the coveted lunchtime spot, attracting an audience and riling up the crowd before the main mid-afternoon political speech. Nicknamed Kaffa [*cafard*, or cockroach], his prop was a large black dildo. To the delight of the hundreds assembled, all women within sight were targets of his act and subject to verbal and non-verbal prods. He made suggestive remarks about what he or an audience member could and would do to a woman picked from the few in the crowd, or more often a woman vending. He impersonated the woman in speech and walk, usually with a noxiously shrill voice and a wide-legged, uncomfortable hobble—after having been penetrated by the large black penis. In one speech he recounted entering a woman who had begged him for sex when he realized he needed to urinate. So he urinated inside of her. Reversing the peripheral Abidjanais man's struggle to find a mate, Kaffa's humor involved women desiring and begging. The male protagonist, in turn, left her in pain or degraded.

Kaffa's punch lines usually involved a nexus of the penis, power and race. Often he assumed the character of a white—and particularly French—woman pretending to hate or fear the black man, but always succumbing to his penis with giggles and moans. White women, he explained knowingly to eager audiences, might not like black men. But they cannot help but love the black penis. Kaffa's accounts adopted familiar themes, such as a visit to the French embassy. There a secretary asks him of his plans in Paris and his profession in Abidjan. Pulling out the dildo, he responds that this is his job. Kaffa congratulated regulars who had been absent, insinuating that they had taken an *adventure* to France and returned with a French lover. Additionally, Kaffa often infused his jokes with politics. Among his favorite themes was President Sarkozy's inadequate penis—the reason his first wife left him—measured up against President Gbagbo's robust sexual appetite. Gbagbo's political rivals, Henri Konan Bédié and Alassane Ouattara, were equally incompetent between the sheets.

Ignoring the reality of crisis, Kaffa's narratives portrayed a man supporting his family, and a mistress on the side. He often chose a man from the crowd as the purported protagonist, thus grounding his account in the experience of an everyday Ivoirian. Life is difficult, he explained, because women cost so much. And when a man is at work, it is the penis his woman misses. Playing to the fantasy of a dominant masculinity, Kaffa explained in detail how to cheat on one's wife with the maid, mounting her while calmly explaining that she has just received a raise. In these ways Kaffa constructed an image of the Ivoirian man doubly masculine via his financial and sexual potency. To audience cheers he decried condoms. He warned that condoms catch the HIV virus in the penis, and their extended use leads to impotence. Worse still was *coco*, a little-known side effect of condom use that leaves men blind and makes their penises fall off. Moreover, condoms wasted sperm destined to be planted in a woman's egg. Ejaculation, Kaffa insisted, marks the moment that proves one's manhood; God made women to carry a man's sperm and eventually his children. Presumably, this left men to engage in work and politics.

Conclusion

Contemporary African urbanity, survival etched in crisis, involves a feminization of work. I have shown how the crisis narrative depicts African urbanity as deficient or deviating from a normative urbanity whereby men are unable to approximate the idealized wage-earning worker. At the *Sorbonne*, peripheral Abidjanais men asserted dominant masculine subjectivities that contested their physical and ideological place in the urban crisis narrative. By contesting not scripts of modernity and crisis but their own peripheral position, the “crisis” could not become a “productive” force with the potential to provide a “means to transgress and [necessitate] change or transformation” (Roitman 2012). It was instead a destructive force that men attempted to escape in the fantasized, protected space of the *Sorbonne*. Accepting the deficiencies of the crisis they carved out an exceptional space that denied its realities.

Masculinity, citizenship, and modernity converged to underscore the particular geopolitics of the *miracle Ivoirien* and its demise. Gbagboist nationalists derived legitimacy from an Ivoirian identity that excluded regional migrants and bore a stated disdain for the former *colon*. Articulating a normative order that did not deviate from but adhered to a dominant masculine identity, *Sorbonne* orators and spectators presented themselves as informed, politicized and global, while women stood in the background as servile or sexual objects. As often happens in situations of powerlessness, the peripheral Abidjanais men who attended the *Sorbonne* derived authority by asserting dominance over others with marginally less. They thus conflated an anti-colonial struggle with an autochthonous movement that rejected regional migrants and northerners, and upheld their masculinities on the backs of women. It is no coincidence that migrants and women were those whose working identities men in the informal economy had come to reflect. In denigrating them they denied these groups’ legitimacy as political or economic actors, thus reclaiming their entitlements via gendered and nationalist exclusions. But doing so left them without means of reclaiming dignity in their own working lives, confining their enacted masculinity-as-hyperbole to the *Sorbonne*. Their search for dominance thus undermined the revolutionary potential of the crisis moment.

Gbagboists used anti-colonialist rhetoric to assert their place locally and globally, vocally rejecting France and purporting to lead a pan-African revolution. Nonetheless, this investigation of the *Sorbonne*, their central public and social platform, demonstrates that they called into question neither the normative “expectations of modernity” (Ferguson, 1999) that have undermined their masculine subjectivities nor a system of rule predicated on the supremacy of the *évolué*-as-autochthon. Confronted by the pressure of contemporary global ideals and their own *miracle Ivoirien* achieved by way of close associations with the *colon* and an aspired *évolué* identity, many peripheral Abidjanais men find their informal livelihoods inadequate. Contesting men’s powerlessness and their questionable mastery of modernity amidst crisis, the *Sorbonne* seized public space and political discourse. It imprinted a masculine subjectivity and a centered narrative for peripheral men in their city and their country in the world.

Endnotes

- ¹ For readings on the use of the built environment to establish divisions between colonizer and colonized, see ALSayyad (1992).
- ² The Ivorian crisis, like other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, was largely precipitated by structural adjustment measures, falling commodity prices and high debt in the 1980s. It has been exacerbated by turn-of-the-century political conflict: a *coup d'état* in 1999 and civil war in 2002 that left the country divided between a government-controlled north and rebel-controlled south. Roitman (2012) writes that the crisis "is never itself explained because it allows for the further reduction of 'crisis' to other elements, such as capitalism, economy, politics, culture, subjectivity. In that sense, crisis is not a condition to be observed (loss of meaning, alienation, faulty knowledge); it is an observation that produces meaning."
- ³ These numbers were certainly higher at the time of my research after sustained political conflict: much of the formal economy was dependent on expatriate-owned businesses which shut down at the same time that the city's population size swelled.
- ⁴ Detailed analyses of the *Sorbonne* and affiliated parliaments across Abidjan include Banégas (2006a, 2010), Cutolo and Banégas (2012), Théroux-Bénoni (2009) and Bahi (2003).
- ⁵ "Student" is also a euphemism for the unemployed. One may be a student for a decade or longer, paying the minimum fees to maintain the student status while looking, or more appropriately hoping, for work.
- ⁶ At the time of my research, 500FCFA was approximately equivalent to US\$1.
- ⁷ Bayart (2000) discusses this phenomenon as pandemic for African leaders whose external gaze detracts from attention, or blame, regarding internal problems.
- ⁸ The spillover of religion into other discourses is part of the larger evangelization of Africa, and in particular reflects President Gbagbo and his wife Simone's Pentecostal fervor. Talk of the crisis generally had a large spiritual dimension, and orators sold pamphlets to unveil the truth of the crisis, peddling its antidote alongside medicinal cure-alls.
- ⁹ Audience members were unmoved. Receiving donations, regardless of how enthusiastically received a speech had been, could be difficult.
- ¹⁰ I have translated all quotations from the original French.
- ¹¹ A few weeks later it was revealed that this man had run off with people's money. The *Sorbonne* President made an exceptional appearance to share his anger with the crowd and to promise that this would never happen again.
- ¹² This is a traditional Ivorian practice at all kinds of performances. Contributions are received at the end of a performance in lieu of an entrance fee. Big men are singled out with respect, and expected to give the most. Highly visible, the contribution becomes part of the act and a way to bestow status on patrons.
- ¹³ The *Sorbonne* not only allowed members to enact dominant masculinities, but also inscribed a hierarchical order of respecting and subordinating to elders, who were in turn charged with "big men" responsibilities of financial support to their followers.
- ¹⁴ An indication of the delicate balance between authentic and inauthentic dominant masculinities at play at the *Sorbonne* is the quickness with which the master of ceremonies will distinguish a guest speaker who is a "real" professor, or doctor or pastor.

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