Brands as masks: public secrecy and the counterfeit in Côte d’Ivoire

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Rethinking Simmel’s comparison of secrecy and adornment, I consider the ways in which brands function much like masking practices, concealing even as they reveal, using the visible to hide/signify the invisible. The classic masking scenario is one in which men wear masks and claim to be powerful ancestral spirits, keeping the fact of their performance a secret from women and uninitiated boys. However, the secrecy is ambiguous, for women give signs of knowing and men seem to believe in the spirits they pretend to be only pretending to be. In Côte d’Ivoire, where masks are a symbol of national identity, consumption focuses around displaying supposedly authentic name brand labels. Urban Ivoirians call this display of wealth and consumption ‘bluffing’, exposing the artifice of their supposed affluence. Still, the success of their performance depends on the authenticity of expensive European and American brands, in a market where most of what is available is counterfeit. Underneath the public secret of their performative display lies the deeper secret that they remain uncertain of the legitimacy of their purchases. Masks and brands both metaphorically delineate a metonymic though invisible connection to authentic power, but the secrecy of what lies beneath the masked performance provides an unstable ambiguity in which it is always possible that the surface is that which it represents. Brands always contain this instability between appearance and the genuine, for all are ultimately copies whose uncertain authenticity we cover up with public secrecy.

We now declare that the trademark of [Côte d’Ivoire] will be the mask, for it is representative, rather pleasing to observe, and enshrouded in an air of mystery.

Duon Sadia, the Minister of Tourism of Côte d’Ivoire, as cited in Steiner 1992a: 53

The modern trademark does not function to identify the true origin of goods. It functions to obscure that origin, to cover it with a myth of origin.

Beebe 2008: 52

Brand logos are expected to be transparent indicators of authentic quality, and a great deal of effort is expended worldwide on policing counterfeits and piracy to protect that assumption. But a more counterintuitive approach might help explain why brands matter even when most of us distrust the relationship between the logo and the purported authenticity of the object it adorns. Perhaps the analytic focus of social science upon branded goods as objects of display and identity blinds us to an important element of how they are endowed with value in practice: the performative context of how we enact brand value may be as much about concealment and secrecy as it is about display. Indeed, I have come to think that masking rituals and the public secrecy that
surrounds masking performances provide a provocative model for thinking through brands, counterfeits, and the embodied consumption of such products. I came to this idea through an effort to understand Ivorian relationships to American and European brand-name sportswear. In a market rife with counterfeits, why would social actors insist on purchasing authentic brand-name clothing in order to perform a seemingly 'false' identity? Especially when audiences were aware of the deception?

During my fieldwork in Abidjan between the summers of 2000 and 2001, I was confronted with this question as I watched unemployed young men spend all the money they could scuffle together in a performance of success called bluffing. The bluff culminated in the danse de logobi, a dance of brands, in which they displayed expensive American sportswear like Nike, Dockers, Sebago, and Fubu. This dance and the musical style of zouglou it was linked to later metamorphosed into the internationally followed musical genre of coupé-décalé (scam and scram, cut and move) popularized by Douk Saga and his 'Jet Set' entourage (Kohlhagen 2006; McGovern 2011: 116-19).1 Douk Saga presented himself as a national hero (the title of one of his songs) who returned to Côte d'Ivoire from Europe to bring gaiety and luxury to the war-torn population. In other words, he responded to the economic and political stranglehold on Côte d'Ivoire by upping the ante on the bluff, sending people into dizzying spirals of escapist consumption. This scene involved the act of travailler (to work), which signified the act of dancing as well as conspicuously giving money to people on the dance floor. Dancing was also referred to as 'wasting', and a good dancer would be encouraged by calls of 'gaspiller, on te din' (waste, we are watching you). In this way the bluff collapses and inverts oppositions of production and consumption – to waste is to work. But the paradox of the bluff is that those watching were well aware that this was a performance of wealth rather than the real thing. As their label indicates, the bluffeurs were known for the illusion of wealth they produced rather than what they actually possessed. And yet everyone acted as though they were participating in a kind of performative magic, in which the represented became, at least for the moment, reality itself. While people did sometimes scoff about bluffeurs behind their backs, in the presence of the performance itself audiences typically responded with awe. Stories circulated constantly about these displays of wealth and expensive clothing, and reputations were self-consciously built upon bluff. Bluffing itself was recognized as a form of artistry, unsurprisingly given the importance of cons in the 'second economy' through which most young men made their living.

Nor was this the first time I had been faced with the question. I went to Abidjan from Paris, where I had spent nine months with Congolese immigrants whose lack of a visa prevented them from legitimate income, and yet who took every opportunity they could to display suits made by the likes of Hugo Boss, Versace, Armani, and Dolce & Gabbana (Bazanquisa 1992; Friedman 1991; 1994; Gandoulou 1984; 1989; Gondola 1999; MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000).2 The sapeurs, a kind of Congolese dandy, also performed a danse des griffes in which they elegantly displayed the labels of the clothes they were wearing. There were even clothing duels in which two sapeurs faced off in a style showdown in which one was obliged to exit the party shamefully in defeat (Gandoulou 1984). I met a man who had spent nights hiding in hospitals during Parisian winters, only to walk out in the morning in an outfit that cost thousands of dollars. Another lived in a single room in a seventh-floor walkup, with only a sink and hotplate (the bathroom and shower were shared with the rest of that floor), his sole income drawn from the sale of small amounts of unrefined heroin. He had no closet, but his walls were lined with suits of the finest quality, and he was never seen on the
streets in anything but the best. Amazingly, the phenomenon of *la sape* has continued unabated now for thirty years, through multiple civil wars, the tightening of French borders, and the ageing of several generations of *sapeurs*.

Amongst the many puzzles to unravel in these stories, a central problem is certainly the relationship between mimesis and modernity, a primary thread of my book on the bluff (Newell 2012). I argue there that such mimetic performances in the postcolony are neither mere re-enactments of tradition using symbols of modernity (Friedman 1994), nor simply declarations of membership (Ferguson 2006), but rather represent intermeshed cultural logics in which local understandings of performative magic merge with the anxieties over authenticity and imitative reproduction at the heart of capitalist economies. I found that at every level the opposition between real and fake collapsed into itself, and yet this ambiguity did not seem to impact the importance of the act itself. Indeed, far from a corruption of proper capitalist behaviour, the Ivorian bluff became a model for the interpretation of modernity itself: capitalist value in the global economy is itself a product of bluffing, and increasingly so, leading to disastrous events like those of 2008 when people expose that which everyone already secretly knew, that capitalist value is a product of social construction.

As I focused increasingly upon the aporias of bluffing — a form of display that conceals, a kind of faking that is revealed and yet remains effective — I was drawn to the literature on masking rituals, in which similar dynamics of concealing while revealing were at play. The fact that such masking events are pervasive across Côte d’Ivoire — even if non-existent in Abidjan itself — made such a comparison all the more enticing. The classic masking situation, examples of which are scattered across the globe (Taussig 1999), is one in which men wear masks and perform as supernatural beings (ancestors, forest spirits, deities) for women and children, who all at least pretend not to know that the beings before them are their own husbands, fathers, and brothers, wearing costumes in order to deceive them. The significance of such masking rituals for understanding the relationship between brands and counterfeits lies in what they can tell us about fakes that are treated as authentic sources of power and value, even when — or precisely because — the deceit is known to its targets and performers. Just as audiences of masking ceremonies must know or at least suspect that masks are performed by members of their village and yet express their belief in masks as mystical creatures, Abidjanese crowds at an outdoor bar typically knew most of the people present, knew where they lived, and the circumstances of their daily existence — they could not have been fooled. Yet the greater the display of excess, the greater the reputation a *bluffeur* could garner on the street. This semiotic configuration corresponds to the performative power of the public secret, of the known deceit found in masking. The persuasive power of masking practices, in which the origins of both worldly and otherworldly authority are simultaneously displayed and concealed, offers us important insight into the uncomfortable relationship between brand image and brand authenticity in Côte d’Ivoire and beyond.

As I struggled to understand how Abidjanese youth negotiated these imbricated logics and what motivated and gave meaning to their destructively costly *mise-en-scènes*, I found another aporia within the larger problem of bluffing modernity, another kernel in which relationships between authenticity and performance kept inverting themselves: brands. The explicit performativity of the bluff did not free actors from ‘the real’. Their reputation depended upon the perceived authenticity of the brands they wear, and this authenticity was always suspect in a local market saturated with
counterfeit goods. To purchase and proudly display a false label was to reveal one’s inability to distinguish between real and fake. While suppressing their anxiety over the authenticity of their clothing, bluffeurs had to convince their audience through dance and performance of their urban savvy and ability to distinguish the ‘real’. In a sense, then, it was once again performance that manufactured the value of the good. While the specificity of urban Ivorian understanding of brands reminds us that brands are always incorporated into local cultural logics, I suggest that Ivorian performances surrounding brands may reveal aspects of the semiotic nature of brands that might otherwise remain invisible to us. Drawing on the recent anthropological theorization of brands (Foster 2007; Manning 2010; Mazzarella 2003; R.E. Moore 2003; Vann 2006), I suggest that brands in general rely upon a gap between materiality and symbolic value that is always under negotiation, such that the invisible qualities of brands are never truly perceivable, but simultaneously signified and obscured by their deceptive surfaces. In this sense the underlying inauthenticity of branded objects, the fact that all are mass-produced copies worth far less than the value we endow them with, is a public secret masked by our own performative consumption.

Taussig defines the public secret as ‘that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated’ (1999: 5). Public secrecy is all around us, from our social pretence that our bodies are not all naked beneath the thin veneer of our clothes to the hidden humanity of our political leaders. The relationship between knowledge and power at all levels is mediated by public secrecy; it is the ‘active non-knowing’ (Taussig 1999: 7) of the audience that provides the potency of knowledge and gives power the illusion of knowing. The idea that surface and depth, illusion and authenticity are not opposed but intertwined is furthered by Taussig’s insistence that unmasking does not expose or diminish mystery, but rather extends it, exposing not the truth itself, but the reliance of truth upon illusion (1999: 53, 105). Thus the fact that everyone knows that masks conceal human performers rather than deities does not diminish faith in the power of the masks or the deities they embody. And so with the bluffeurs – their power comes not from deceit exactly, but from the collective faith in the power of their illusions.

Simmel tells us that secrecy and display are intimately connected, that ‘although apparently the sociological counter-pole of secrecy, adornment has, in fact, a societal significance with a structure analogous to that of secrecy itself’ (1950: 338). The anthropology of secrets has made much of this insight, demonstrating how the power of secrets can only be used by making known, by publicizing, the fact of possessing something hidden (Barber 1981; Bellman 1979; 1984; de Jong 2005; Gable 1997; Gottlieb 2000; Jorgensen 1990; Nooter 1993; Taussig 1999). The secret is an ‘adorning possession’ made more potent because its exact nature is unknown. Thus the content of the secret is less important than the fact of its concealed existence, the attraction of its invisible presence. But the flip-side of the coin has been relatively ignored: consumption and display may be more contingent upon the ambiguous potency of secrecy than we typically recognize. As Simmel puts it, ‘the secret produces an immense enlargement of life, offering a second world alongside the manifest world’ (1950: 330). Secrecy offers all of the potency of the invisible that lurks just on the other side of the visible, present but out of sight. It is this hidden potency that the surfaces of display rely on in order to convey value. After all, value is a matter of social convention; it is by nature invisible.

This article thus begins with a discussion of masking, especially that of Côte d’Ivoire, in order to explore the role of public secrecy and the relationship between display and the potency of the invisible. Through this ethnographic exploration I build a model for
understanding Ivoirian bluffeurs as a parallel to masking, a kind of performative illusion that is at once known to be false and yet respected as having real and potent value. In turn, Ivoirian consumption becomes a model for understanding the relationship between brands and counterfeits on a global level as a kind of masking performance based on public secrecy.

**Masquerade: faces and surfaces of deception**

Masking is one of Côte d’Ivoire’s more prevalent and widespread religious practices. Steiner writes that the Ivoirian state attempted to make the mask ‘a symbol of national identity or character’ (1992a: 53). Indeed, as quoted in the opening epigraph, this was an explicit effort to ‘brand’ Côte d’Ivoire internationally as the nation of masking, the zenith of such attempts being FESTIMASK. The idea was to promote national identity and tourism simultaneously by bringing together all the ethnic groups of the country in a single masking event. Interestingly, the festival failed because nationals and tourists alike viewed the performances as ‘inauthentic’ (Steiner 1992a: 57). Reading forwards, we can see this as an early (though botched) state effort to produce an overarching sense of national identity: the very sentiments which later emerged at a grass-roots level in Abidjan in the 1990s and have tragically led to the radical division of Ivoirians today. Reading backwards, the festival provides evidence of the key role masks played in Ivoirian public life in its locally construed form.

Masking ritual performances were not merely aesthetic productions, or moments of spiritual reflection. As Kasfir says of the Dan of western Côte d’Ivoire: ‘The mask system penetrated the social system, rather than remaining its symbolic counterpart. Masks personified and carried out real political roles from the judgment of criminals to the settlement of land disputes’ (1988: 7). Masks were the basis of a kind of theatre, but they were not merely representative; they had efficacy. ‘We can speak of masking as the cultural system, rather than simply its symbolic parallel’ (Kasfir 1988: 7). One of the most widespread and better-known Ivoirian masking rituals was the Poro, enacted by a secret masking society which stretches across much of West Africa. Among its key purposes was to organize a male initiation ceremony during which the initiates were removed from the village to live in the sacred grove, a space that was designated as both village and forest, both living and dead (Förster 1993). This was the space in which the masks were stored, and which no uninitiated person could enter without risk of death (Bellman 1984: 10).

Bellman (1979), discussing the Kpelle version of Poro in Liberia, describes how boys were removed from society to the bush and described as dead to women and the uninitiated. Everyone acted as though they believed the boys to be dead, even though all were aware of the boys’ existence. Secrecy, then, is not really about the content of the secret so much as the right to know and communicate that knowledge – or as Taussig puts it, ‘to know what not to know’ (1999: 2). Secrecy thus produces what Mbembe (2001) refers to as ‘simultaneous multiplicities’, such that ‘both social realities coexist: the boys are dead, the boys are in the bush’ (Bellman 1979: 16). Both worlds were known, but one could not be spoken in public. During this time the boys were taught the means of articulation: how to speak the secret language of the society and how to participate in making and performing the masks. It is only once they had learned the ritual actions that they grasped the interpretative keys necessary to be able to speak the Poro secret language (Förster 1993: 35). As they progressed further up the hierarchy of the society, they learned the secrets of how to perform (and comprehend) masks of greater significance and mystery. Thus, hierarchy was built upon the selectively attributed rights to
articulation of the secret. As Jorgensen (1990) revealed for the Telefolmin of Papua New Guinea, each level of articulation produces an alternative reality which falsifies those understandings learned at the previous level.

Just as the boys’ ‘not-death’ is a public secret, the performance of masks is likewise not-performed. The village audience does not differentiate between theatrical representation and the actual presence of these terrifying creatures in their midst; they are not meant to recognize that these creatures are human fabrications. Despite their collusion in the production of elaborate illusions, even the performers themselves do not seem to think of the masks as props, but rather speak of them with dread and respect, even out of earshot of the women they are supposed to be fooling. Indeed, the most feared mask, the Kporo, is responsible for severing the double of the person from the body at death and bringing it to the world of the dead: if the ritual is not performed properly, the spirit may be trapped in the world of the living, with disastrous results (Förster 1993: 39). The trick thus has efficacy, much like the healing practices of Que-salid, Lévi-Strauss’s (1963) famous quack shaman, who sought out to reveal the trickery of magical practices, only to become the greatest healer in the region because he would never reveal the secret to his trick. Everyone acts as though the masks were real creatures, even though everyone knows it is a human production, and by virtue of that the mask takes on real, non-human powers.

However, the most important aspect of the masks for our current purposes is their relationship to visuality. Mbembe is instructive in his description of the ‘autochthonous status of the image’ in Cameroon (2001: 145). He says that the obverse and reverse of the image, its visible surface and the hidden forces that the surface obscures, were ‘governed by relations of similarity’ such that neither was a copy or model of the other: ‘The invisible was in the visible, and vice versa, not as a matter of artifice, but as one and the same and as external reality simultaneously – as the image of the thing and the imagined thing, at the same time’ (Mbembe 2001: 145). Mbembe writes that the figurative capability, the power to project an image, an illusion, can be considered in this context to have the power to bring to life the thing for which the image was a metaphor, to conjoin the world of the living and that of the shades or spirits. Writing of the Dan, Reed says that masks do not represent spirits, nor is the person inside the mask possessed by a spirit, but rather ‘the ge [mask] is the spirit itself’ (2003: 4).

Some masks are not visible at all, but merely aurally indexed, as one Bellman (1979: 15) described in which a senior member blew a horn meant to be the sound of a witch screaming while the novices ran behind flapping their arms against their sides to create the sound effect of whips beating the witch. At the other extreme we have the wonderful Cameroonian masks described by Argenti (2007) that walk around in broad daylight without any face-covering, and yet their audience treats them as unrecognizable so long as they are inhabited by the spirit that possesses them. Even those masks we hang in museums as classic objects of aesthetic display are not necessarily to be understood locally as visual objects: ‘The more important a Baule sculpture is, the less it is displayed, just as in public debates the most senior and respected people speak the least’ (Vogel 1997: 65). Masks are normally kept hidden away in darkness. These are not objects of visual reverence and contemplation – the etiquette of the gaze is to avert it before power, and to see that which was not authorized could bring death in consequence (whether mystically or humanly administered).

Even those masks which are clearly made to be visually appreciated, to both please and deceive the eye (many of them are full-body ensembles that obscure the human
form of the wearer), are not meant to be looked at too directly. Vogel (1997) tells us that language surrounding such masks is closer to that of the theatre, in which much of the ‘art’ is the ‘artful’ obscuring of vision to produce controlled visual effects. Display performances often occur at night, under conditions of inebriation and fatigue, or the audience is kept at an appropriate distance by subsidiary members or lesser masks policing the event. But rather than finding that this indicates the weakness of the fake, that these are efforts to conceal its imperfect imitation of divine power, I want to suggest the reverse: it is precisely the ambiguity of the unseen that lends these visual referents their power, for these sacred objects are important in invisible ways. The mask is a humanly constructed visual display of an invisible but authentic presence; or, perhaps more accurately, it is the visual sign of the possibility, always uncertain, that this mysterious force exists.

True Ivoirians, true brands: yere perception and the counterfeit

Just as our concept of the mask is mired in culturally constructed visuality, I think academic and folk theories of consumption continue to be dominated by the idea of surface imitation, of counterfeit identities, of passing: there is a moral attachment to the genuine and a fear of inauthenticity. Our interest in mimesis is squeamish (Ferguson 2006), but also carries an obsessive fascination; we cannot look away. Precisely because the inauthentic carries connotations of immorality in North Atlantic cultures, we fail to perceive the positive transcendence of both bluffing and masking, its ability to produce value from ‘simultaneous multiplicity’. In this section, using my own field-work from Abidjan, I undermine the opposition between brand and counterfeit by considering the way in which both are interlaced with public secrecy: that which is known but cannot be articulated.

In Abidjan, bluffing was an activity primarily engaged in by unmarried and unemployed urban men (typically between 15 and 35) called nouchi (bandits) who publicly spent large sums of money while wearing expensive brand-name clothing (Newell 2012). Although this would seem to indicate a group on the fringes of society, Côte d’Ivoire’s economy was such that only 17 per cent of men under 25 had work in 1992 (Le Pape 1997), a figure that could only have worsened by 2000. There were even fewer Ivoirian men employed than these statistics indicate, however, because over 35 per cent of Abidjan’s population was made up of immigrants (almost 50 percent in my neighbourhood) and over 67 per cent of the immigrant population was employed. Thus Ivoirians dominated the informal economy while immigrants took up much of the low-end legitimate work. Within the urban setting of Abidjan, bluffing became a means through which men established their claim to national identity or Ivoirité, a specifically urban vision of cosmopolitan Ivoirian identity.

The importance and danger of this urban vision of national identity has become increasingly apparent as its logic underlies the violent dichotomization of Ivoirian society that has riven the country since the failed coup d’état of 2002 (Newell 2012). While there is not space to elaborate the full extent of this logic here, it is important to note that it was through the connoisseurship necessary to consume ‘real’ brands or detect ‘fakes’ – or at least the performance of this ability – that urban Ivoirians differentiated themselves from the ‘unrefined’ taste of their immigrant imitators. In other words, within nouchi logic, the ability to detect ‘fake’ products was necessary to be a ‘real’ Ivoirian, and thereby granted the performer the ability to detect ‘counterfeit’ citizenship as well.

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The bluff was not usually ‘unmasked’ by exposing the poverty of the actor – everybody knew the wealth was an illusion, even if it was rarely acknowledged. Bluffeurs and their audiences revelled in the image of success and avoided recognition of its deceptive qualities, but the spectre of the fake reasserted itself in another form: brand authenticity. The authenticity of the articles of consumption served as a focal point for evaluations of social personhood, even if poverty did not. Only a gaou (fool) would publicly consume a fake, and the discovery of such a breach revealed one’s inability to see the difference between the real and its copy. This danger provoked considerable anxiety in a market saturated with counterfeit goods.

Abidjan’s street youth interpreted most hierarchical relationships and value, including those among brand-name objects, in terms of a distinction between yere and gaou, slang terms from the urban language Nouchi (Newell 2009). Yere describes someone who cannot be scammed because his urban savvy allows him to see through deception, while the verb ‘to yere’ is to steal from someone. By contrast a gaou is someone incapable of discerning his surroundings, and therefore someone easily duped. Since the savvy urban citizen was likely to gain part of his income from the second economy, recent arrivals to the city and immigrants were the likeliest targets of his cons, and gaou qualities were thus readily associated with the population of African immigrants in Abidjan. At the same time, urban youth applied this opposition to taste and connoisseurship concerning consumption. A gaou did not know how to dress, or how to differentiate between a counterfeit and the real thing. Likewise, commodities and clothing of Western origin were yere in relation to Ivoirian-made products (and American clothes were more yere than French ones), while Ivoirian products were often superior to those made in other African countries. Geographical locations, both migratory destinations and origins of consumer goods, were arranged hierarchically according to this logic of social value.

Thus the competitive display of bluffing – the central act of identity production for young Ivoirian men – was not simply a display of money and foreign goods, but also a display of the cultural mastery of the symbols of modern identity, differentiating themselves from ‘untrue’ Ivoirians incapable of making such distinctions. Abdou, a tailor, expounded on Ivoirian fashion sense:

A true Ivoirian prefers brands from America especially. We like this kind of clothing and will without thinking about it spend 180,000 CFA ($250) for a pair of sneakers with Jordan written on them rather than a suit for the same price. Just because it says Jordan on it. And there are sneakers just as good made in Côte d’Ivoire, but nobody wants that. People want these kinds of things for la frime (to show off). They will show up in a bar and sit in just such a way that you will be forced to see the brand and know that they paid more for their shirt than you did.

It is important that actors are quite explicit that their economic sacrifices are for the purpose of display; it is for their ability to seduce an audience and demonstrate the validity of their taste that actors search for the ‘real’ thing.

Arguments over the relative value of a particular object or brand were therefore expressions of struggles over social superiority and displays of connoisseurship in ‘modern’ culture. Benoît, a student of pharmaceuticals at the University of Abidjan, criticized his younger cousin Christophe for being a gaou for spending the equivalent of $100 on a pair of shoes when you could get the same thing made by the Ghanaians around the corner for a couple of bucks. Christophe responded that even if Benoît had
a million CFA francs, he would still be the gaou, because he didn’t know how to
distinguish quality. Later Christophe came over to my apartment still fuming. He said:

Benoît was trying to tell me that dress shoes are better than Sebago. But he doesn’t know anything ...
Look at the clothes Benoît wears, his worthless shoes. Me, I appreciate real brands: Sony, Samsung, Philips. For cars, it’s BMW, Benz. If the brand is powerful and expensive, if it’s authentic, then it is for me.

Benoît and Christophe each believed they had superior knowledge of value, but argued
from different schemas altogether. For Benoît, the discussion turned around the func-
tional materiality of the object in relation to its cost (‘good value’), whereas Christophe
considered himself to have the ability to distinguish ‘powerful’ objects from those made
locally and thus disconnected from circuits of power. Employing that ultimate mark of
distinction in which only renowned connoisseurs can safely indulge, the ironic display
of bad taste, Abidjanais youth more recently developed the Soirée Gaou. At such social
events, young people dressed up in counterfeit goods and out-of-date clothes in a
competition of anti-style, seeking a prize for the worst dressed – further emphasizing
their symbolic mastery through negation.10

Luc, part of the group of underemployed youth in their early twenties who hung around
my neighbourhood, explained that if someone detects that you are wearing a fake label,
it is la honte (shameful). To wear a fake showed that you were a gaou, that someone was
able to yere you into spending money on a worthless object. The moment of purchase is
a test of the urban savvy of consumers, of their ability to differentiate the real from
imitation, and therefore another source of hierarchy. Luc said that it was very dangerous
to buy clothes at stores like Petit Paris because they had so many imitation labels:

The majority of the stuff there are false things, griffes collées (glued-on labels). They will tell you it is
an original, but if you buy it they will say afterwards, ‘We yere’d him, we cheated a gaou’. But if it’s us,
we know, we say, ‘I can’t pay for that, because it is not the original’. It can look very close to the real
thing.

When Luc bought his Sebago shoes, he went with a friend who knew how to differentiate:

It was at one of those Lebanese stores. They handed us one pair and said it was 50,000 CFA ($
75). [My
friend] said ‘no, that’s not the real thing’ (because there are three kinds, from United States, from
France, and from Morocco). They sat there and swore up and down it was real, straight from America.
But when we said we were leaving, [the shop owner] said, ‘I think I can find what you’re looking for’,
and came out of the back with the real shoes. ‘Now’, my friend said, ‘can you see the difference?’ One
was a little brighter than the other, and the leather was harder in the back, stiff, whereas the Moroccan
ones were already soft, you could tell they were not as well made.

These anxieties were not merely the result of a projected imagination of fakery: the
market was indeed filled with such fakes. One tailor I knew specialized in griffes collées.
While visiting his shop, a man came off the street pushing a bag full of Italian clothing
labels. My friend considered them seriously, commenting that they were beautiful but
pointed out that they did not match with one another. The tailor said, ‘They are
worthless to me unless it’s a full set, because I sell clothes to clothing stores where things
have to look real.’

Because of these dangers, Luc preferred to go to Le Black (the city’s biggest black
market), where you could find all sorts of second-hand clothing that he ‘knew’ was real.
Paralleling Hansen’s (2000) findings, the fact that such clothes were worn out and discarded by somebody made little difference to its value; it was their authentic origin that concerned these young Ivoirians.

Another source of legitimate ‘real’ products were migrants returning back from the source. In the Nouchi lexicon, migrants who returned from Europe or the United States were called bengistes, and Beng was an encompassing term for all countries they identified with modernity. Dedy, a hardened man in his late thirties once renowned for his style, explained that when they return from Europe, bengistes bring many things to sell:

They are bringing the oridji (originals). In the old days that was what everyone wanted, but the Moroccans made so many fakes that people became really sceptical. They were afraid to spend any money on fakes. So if you bring the real thing [back from Europe] you need to get some local connoisseurs to validate their authenticity. If two or three people legitimate the shoes, you will have people running behind you to buy them.

This reference to connoisseurs brings us to the question of who had the authority to make such decisions. Comparing themselves to other Africans, urban Ivoirians often claimed superior powers of perception when it came to the invisible forces of modernity, even though a common Francophone African joke puns on the word Ivoirien as ‘ils voient rien’ (they see nothing). The mastery of the signs indexing the difference between ‘reals’ and ‘fakes’ becomes key to legitimizing claims of identity – just as the connoisseur displays the ‘naturalized’ ability to distinguish quality (Keane 2003). In the urban Ivoirian context of 2001, the performance of this naturalized ability was a key claim to the authentic citizenship of Ivoirité, and its failure a sign of counterfeit claims to belonging.

Thus, in a marketplace saturated with counterfeits, where the veracity of the brand was anxiously doubted in private, a convincing performance of modern urban identity was needed to anchor the audience’s evaluation of the label as authentic – in other words, when Ivoirians chose to bluff, to faire le show (make a show), it was a declarative public articulation. The culmination of such acts was the danse de logobi (the dance of brands) discussed above, in which Ivoirians said they mettent en valuer (placed value upon, made valuable) the clothing they had accumulated. As Dom, a high-ranking gangster, described it:

The danse de logobi is to mise en valeur les choses (place value on things). One displays the labels, the gold chains, the watch. The dance is composed of these gestures, it is very interesting even. Every gesture places value on a part of the body or an item of clothing.

To perform the clothes was to place value upon them. There would thus seem to be a self-confirming dialectic between the performer’s ability to convince the audience of the brand’s authenticity, on the one hand, and the power of the label to grant the performer their status as modern subjects, on the other. Nevertheless, few social actors could escape the anxiety over their choices and the possibility that someone would see more clearly than themselves.

Just as we saw hierarchical levels of truth and falsity in Poro masking societies, hierarchies of articulation structure the pragmatic integration of counterfeits in social action; the genuine quality of the article itself is much less important than who has the right to publicly declare its authenticity or lack thereof. Goods could only be legitimated by connoisseurs. But who determined who had developed sufficient knowledge of brands to constitute a connoisseur? Within the second economy networks through
which many urban youth survived, relationships were structured according to *vieux-pères* and *fistons* (fathers and sons, respectively). These bonds of fabricated kinship were maintained through asymmetrical exchanges of tribute and redistribution affirming authority. A *vieux-père* profited from the thefts and scams of his underlings, and reciprocated through protection, information, and grand gestures of generosity. These were not strictly defined gangs, as *fistons* could maintain relations with multiple *vieux-pères*; indeed, these relationships and the precise forms of hierarchy they forged were themselves part of an economy of secret knowledge. However, in my experience, a *vieux-père*’s declaration was incontrovertible in his presence; he was the patron and arbiter and he could instantly delegitimate the use of a new slang term or redeem the value of a suspect article of clothing. Brand authenticity was in this sense a performative speech act, and the ongoing suspicion of the counterfeited was a public secret that could not be spoken. But it was precisely this secrecy that gave the objects consumed their imaginative potency, the invisible possibility of authenticity.

I was told the Nouchi word *yere* originates in the Dioula for seeing, that it describes someone ‘qui voit clair’ (who sees clearly), but other interpretations of the word’s etymology include ‘self’, ‘authentic’, or ‘true’. *Dzos* (traditional hunters typically of northern ethnic origin who are infamous for powerful bulletproof magic) utilize the term *dzo yere-yere* to differentiate authentic *dzos* from impostors. However, according to Drissa Kone (pers. comm., 2007), a *dzo* who worked closely with Hellweg (2011) in his research, the word also signifies clarity or openness. Examples he provided included the phrase *nya yere*, which means ‘open eyes’; or the verb phrase *ka da yere*, ‘to open the/a door’. He also referenced a TV show in which an actor shouted, ‘Je vais te yere!’ as in, ‘I’ll make you see’ or ‘I’ll “open” your eyes to the truth about who’s right/in charge!’ Drissa concluded, ‘Quand tu es yere, tu vois clair’. The French phrase ‘il voit clair’ was often used in connection with the *féticheurs*’ ability to see into the mystical goings-on of the otherworld, where witches, spirits, and *jinnis* are at work. Here it seems that *yere* refers to more than simply ordinary ‘clarity’ of sight. Thus, there would appear to be a semiotic connection between authenticity and the ability to see beyond the surfaces of things to the inverse, the behind-the-mask realm where potency exists.

*Yere* seems to connect ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ qualities with symbolic openness to external forces, but with different valences within differing competing discourses. From the perspective of the traditional hunting society of the *dzos*, a true *dzo* was one with the ability to connect with the otherworld of the spirits, to see clearly where normal people cannot see, whereas, for *nouchi* youth, an authentic Ivoirian was someone capable of distinguishing and absorbing value in the other world of modernity, by seeing through the commodity surface to its true provenance and value.12

In drawing a connection between masking and brand performances in Côte d’Ivoire, I am not claiming that the *bluffeurs* themselves thought of their dances as related to masking practices, or that they believed that their own *yere* vision allowed them access to the world of the supernatural (though it is not impossible that some *nouchi* youth thought this way). Their use of *yere* to talk about urban savvy was a metaphorical borrowing that draws attention to a parallel semiotic structure between invisible supernatural forces and those of modernity, a parallelism that has long played into narratives of witchcraft and its uncanny relationship with technology and capitalism (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997; H.L. Moore & Sanders 2001; Smith 2008). The Ivoirian model for the relationship between the spirit world and modernity is beautifully explored by Dozon (1981) in his analysis of how a Bete man views the
transformation that his village undergoes in the second world (the invisible double world existing alongside the world of vis-à-vis [face to face]). A small excerpt of this remarkable transcript is warranted:

In its doubled form, or if you prefer at night, my village is no longer a village. It is a city. It is the capital of a country formed by the four Dobé villages (once their inhabitants, our ancestors, occupied this place called Dobé). There one does not walk on foot, but drive in a car, in a Mercedes. The main street is not bizarre and deteriorated like this, it is large and straight; the sacred forest, the guludjile where our ancestors rest, is a beautiful cathedral (Dozon 1981: 391).

The narrator goes on to describe the secret power structure of the village in terms of a modern democratic state, and claims his knowledge comes from his ability to see the invisible signs of the double world and his personal experience within it. Dozon argues that the transformation of the village into a city is both metaphorical and in some ways a real description of Dobé village society, for the city is invisibly present in its influence upon the village, both through back-and-forth migration and as the powerful influence of absent members upon the lives of villagers through money and politics.

The world of the double, Dozon argues (and this is crucial to our understanding of the relationship between masking, bluffing, and brands), is not opposed to the real. In fact, the world of vis-à-vis should be understood as the theatre, while the space of the double takes on the role of the wings and backstage, where all the invisible manipulations take place to create the illusion of the real. The discourse concerning occult activity is then a ‘theory of the real’, and the ability to see into this space is a ‘capacity for decoding and interpretation’ (Dozon 1981: 394). This relationship between the visible and invisible allows us to turn to the mask as a mediator between realms, a visible object that allows ‘face-to-face’ contact with invisible forces and beings. In the same way, imported brand-name consumer goods allow Ivoirians direct contact with another kind of invisible force: the mysterious potency of modernity and the invisible hand of capitalist value. So a cosmology of an invisible world shaping the visible collapses the opposition between chimera and authenticity, for the real is already a form of deception.

In the nouchi cosmology of modernity, if yere constitutes a kind of openness that allows connectivity with the external/invisible, it is also a means of seeing the ‘truth’ of things. The invisible is a space of imagination once dominated by the dead but now shared with technological apparatus and the mysterious value form of commodities. Like the second world of the occult, the ‘second economy’ of the urban world anxiously combines deceptive (though materializable) illusions and invisible authenticity. It is a space of unseen causality that can only be understood by those with the special eyes to see it. In this sense the logic of yere and the bluff parallels the logic of the masking ritual, in which the deception of visual performance references the invisible and authentic presence for those who have the knowledge to see beyond the illusion. As Ravenhill puts it in his analysis of masks, ‘[T]he visible functions to keep the invisible invisible’ (as cited in Nooter 1993: 58).

The secrecy of brands: commodities that reveal and conceal

To conclude, I want to return to Simmel and a consideration of the implications of the Ivoirian understanding of brands for the relationship between the authentic and counterfeit more generally. Simmel describes adornment as an expansion of the self, a kind of radiation that surrounds the individual — sending out beams of attraction that reflect back as social admiration. He writes:
The attraction of the ‘genuine’, in all contexts, consists in its being more than its immediate appearance, which it shares with its imitation. Unlike its falsification, it is not something isolated; it has roots in a soil that lies beyond its mere appearance, while the unauthentic is only what it can be taken for at the moment. The ‘genuine’ individual, thus, is the person on whom one can rely even when he is out of one’s sight. In the case of jewelry, this more-than-appearance is its value, which cannot be guessed by being looked at, but is something that, in contrast to skilled forgery, is added to the appearance (Simmel 1950: 342).

Here we see that the authentic derives its force from the invisible, from what is in fact obscured by the visible. The counterfeit and the genuine are visibly identical – like a mask, one cannot read the presence of authentic external value merely from its perceptible form, but everyone must act as though one can. Furthermore, the value of the genuine is something ‘added’ to the appearance. For Ivoirian bluffeurs, this is precisely what the accompanying performance is intended to convey: that underlying the surface a real exists that confirms appearance. Likewise, corporations attempt to link their products with people (whether consumers or celebrities in advertisements) who will perform the brand, imbuing it with the personhood it lacks, despite the fact that none of these actors has anything to do with production. Thus, display is as much about the hidden things signalled and yet obscured by the ‘face’ of things as it is about the surface.

Following Robert Moore’s insightful commentary on the unstable semiotic combination underlying the brand, I want to think of brands as composites of ‘tangible, material things (products, commodities) with “immaterial” forms of value (brand names, logos, images)” (2003: 334). A branded product, he suggests, is partly a thing and partly language, and the connections between them are under constant negotiation. Indeed, following the work of Klein (2000) and Strasser (1989), we should consider the development of the brand a response to the mass-produced object, a commodity inherently duplicated unthinkably numbers of times, its production and distribution rendered invisible. It is not simply a guarantee of origins, but also the fabrication of a kind of artificial Maussian hau to replace the personhood in the alienated object (Mazzarella 2003: 192-5). Personhood is enregistered at various levels – in the fictional characters (Aunt Jemima, Tony the Tiger) or celebrities (Michael Jordan) attached to brands (McCracken 2005), as well as in corporations, which are represented as embodying personal qualities, and their consumers, who adopt the brands as part of their identities. Brands function as Peircean quasigns, becoming ‘lovemarks’ rather than mere trademarks (Callon, Méadel & Rabeharisoa 2002; Foster 2007; Manning 2010).

Abstract, largely immaterial images of ‘people’ thus replace the social relations once held between producer and consumer, as well as the local shopkeepers who once stood as a personal guarantor of quality (Klein 2000: 8). As the materiality of the object is reduced to a copy in mass production, its qualitative uniqueness must be reasserted at the level of the brand.

Indeed, as corporations increasingly produce their goods in distant parts of the globe in order to profit from cheap labour, the brand of the product is increasingly distanced from the site of production. In Reinach’s and Yanagisako’s research on Italian brands that manufacture their goods in China, Italian representatives of an undisclosed fashion label are sent to train Chinese workers how to make/fake Italian goods, providing authenticity by virtue of their Italianata (their Italian national identity). They ship the finished products back to Italy in order to add the label ‘Made in Italy’, and then ship them back to China to be sold in one of their fastest-growing consumer markets (Reinach 2009; Yanagisako 2008). In Vann’s (2006) work on Vietnam, savvy consumers...
are not concerned very much with authenticity; rather, their concern is with the quality of the good, hierarchizing products based on the proximity of their quality to the brand they imitate rather than in whether or not it is ‘original’ or ‘authentic’. Thus we find a fundamental instability in the link between the materiality of the object (including its authentic indexical connections to the place of production) and its iconic symbolic content (the meaning or ‘spirit’ of the brand, and its ability to transfer such associations to the consumer).

In conclusion, the performance of value and identity through the display of material objects derives much of its power from the ambiguous relationship between iconicity and indexicality in the branded good. The ‘image-object’ (Mazzarella 2003) consists of an unstable slippage between the constructed surface image of the thing, labelled and discursively produced, and the inescapable but invisible realness of the object – its tactile presence and the historical chain of contiguities that establishes its ‘authenticity’. As Mazzarella indicates, these two aspects can either complement or contradict one another – this is the gap in the commodity form. What I have conveyed in this article is that, like masks, brands overcome the gap between image and its unstable link to authentic materiality through public secrecy.

It only takes the briefest of glances behind the curtain of production to realize that the brand does not really guarantee, or even say, anything about the product, even when we consider ‘the real thing’ (as Coca-Cola likes to refer to itself). Manning (2010) argues that brands have increasingly lost their intended role as rigid and unmanipulable indicators of the origin of their products. As they have morphed into transferable forms of property it has become increasingly debatable whether they can still indicate source or even act as guarantees of quality at all. Manning (2010: 37) cites Beebe: ‘The modern trademark does not function to identify the true origin of goods. It functions to obscure that origin, to cover it with a myth of origin’ (2008: 52). And yet, like the audience of bluffeurs, we all act as though brands denote authentic origins. And as Robert Moore (2003) shows regarding cases of ‘genericide’, for brands to be intelligible at all, we must. In this sense, the logo – whether at the centre of the Ivoirian logobi or displayed in a US department store – is a kind of mask, visually indicating, yet simultaneously occluding the source of its value. And just as the invisible contents beneath the mask provide its force, it is precisely the ambiguity of brand value that lends them the potency of the unseen and imagined. In many acts of everyday consumption, like the audiences of masking ceremonies that Taussig (1999) describes, we silently overlook the inauthenticity of our commodities, knowing that we are not supposed to know.

NOTES

The ideas in this article originally came from a paper that was part of a 2010 American Anthropological Association panel entitled ‘Brands, Counterfeiting, Authenticity, and Authority’ organized by Constantine Nakassis. This panel led me to think through brands and counterfeits in a more subtle way, and I appreciate the comments and encouragement I received from the group as a whole, and especially our discussant Asif Agha. Constantine Nakassis and Brent Luvaas also gave me further feedback on an early version of the article. Much appreciation is also due for the useful and encouraging comments from the anonymous reviewers of my article.

1 To see Douk Saga in action, view some of his videos on youtube. ‘Sagacité’: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGQXhepzpq4; ‘Héros National’: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCXiaZfYq; ‘Douk Saga en Fête’: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otqNBN5.

2 I use the French Côte d’Ivoire instead of Ivory Coast following the decree of former president Felix Houphouët-Boigny in 1985, as well as UN policy. I therefore refer to the country’s inhabitants as Ivoirians, following the French spelling, rather than Ivorians, as one typically finds in Anglophone scholarship.


4 Although masks in West Africa are explicitly man-made, they should not be thought of as inanimate objects. When performed, they become inhabited by the spirit they represent: they are no longer mere human theatre, but spiritual beings with authentic powers over life, death, and society itself. For this reason I sometimes describe masks as agents in order to leave ambiguous the relationship between the performer of the mask, the materiality of the mask as object, and the spirit that the mask and its performer embody and make present.

5 It is interesting here to compare the anxiety of the bluffeurs over authenticity with that of the art market for masks and other carvings in Côte d’Ivoire. Steiner (1992b) tells a marvellous story of a negotiation between an art buyer and an urban merchant in Abidjan, in which the buyer hopes to trade a Seiko watch in exchange for a mask. Each studiously examined the product of the other for tell-tale signs of counterfeiting.

6 Following the work of MacCannell (1976), there is a fascinating parallel between the masking and the ‘staged authenticity’ of performances of culture for the benefit of tourists (some of which are themselves masking ceremonies!), who must similarly suspend disbelief in order to enjoy the authenticity they have paid for (rendering the performance inauthentic).

7 This group is often mirrored by the parallel female organization of the Sande, one of the only documented examples of women’s masking in Africa (Bledsoe 1984). It is worth noting that the phrase mise en valeur was originally a French colonial euphemism for the exploitation of the colonies. It was also used by Houphouët-Boigny to describe his policy of giving land to any immigrant who could mise en valeur the terrain with more cocoa plantations, another strong contributing factor to today’s political tensions.

8 I employ the past tense to refer to my research on the bluff because the popular culture I studied was, like all culture, ephemeral. In general, it probably behooves us as anthropologists to abandon the ethnographic theoretical abstractions, exist outside of time.

9 All names used to reference by informants are pseudonyms. It is notable that Abdou was of Muslim origin, but expresses precisely the kind of distinction through which Muslims would be excluded as false Ivoirians in the struggles to follow in 2002.

10 Some masking ceremonies incorporate anti-aesthetic performance in a similar way, such as the Gongole mask of Sande women’s society (the female corollary to the Poro). The Gongole is played by a male performer as a grotesque, clownish parody of the graceful dance and beautiful adornment of the female masqueraders. His clowning highlights the girls’ beauty through a kind of inverse mirroring.

11 It is also worth noting that the phrase mise en valeur was originally a French colonial euphemism for the exploitation of the colonies. It was also used by Houphouët-Boigny to describe his policy of giving land to any immigrant who could mise en valeur the terrain with more cocoa plantations, another strong contributing factor to today’s political tensions.

12 There are multiple ironies here. The urban Ivoirians who characterize themselves as yere frame Dioula identity as the epitome of the gaou, whose eyes are closed to the forces of causality that surround them in the urban sphere. And yet Dioula identity itself emerged from the urban environment and is of relatively recent origin (Launay 1982).

REFERENCES


Les marques comme masques : secret public et contrefaçon en Côte d’Ivoire

Résumé

En revisitant la comparaison entre secret et ornementation de Simmel, l’auteur examine la manière dont les marques ont un fonctionnement proche des pratiques de masquage, cachant autant qu’elles révèlent, utilisant le visible pour dissimuler l’invisible et le signifier. Dans le scénario classique du masquage, les hommes portent des masques et prétendent être de puissants esprits ancestraux, en gardant la réalité de leur performance secrète pour les femmes et les jeunes garçons non initiés. Ce secret est pourtant ambigu car les femmes, par certains signes, montrent qu’elles savent et les hommes paraissent croire aux esprits qu’ils feignent de contrefaire. En Côte d’Ivoire, où les masques sont un symbole d’identité nationale, la consommation est centrée sur le fait d’arborer des marques présentées comme authentiques. Les Ivoiriens urbains appellent « bluffing » cet affichage de richesse et de consommation, démasquant l’artifice de leur prétendue aisance. Le succès de leur performance dépend toutefois de l’authenticité des marques européennes et américaines coûteuses qu’ils arborent, sachant que la majorité des produits disponibles sont des contrefaçons. Sous le secret public de cet affichage performatif se cache le secret plus profond de l’incertitude quant au bon aloi de ces acquisitions. Masques et marques, les uns comme les autres, délimitent métaphoriquement un lien métonymique mais invisible avec le pouvoir authentique. Le secret de ce qu’il y a sous la performance masquée crée cependant une ambiguïté inconstante, au sein de laquelle il est toujours possible que la surface soit bien ce qu’elle représente. Les marques contiennent toujours cette instabilité entre apparence et authenticité car il s’agit toujours, en fin de compte, de copies dont l’on dissimule l’authenticité douteuse à l’aide d’un secret public.

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