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1. Introduction

- 1 Date of birth is an important element among those that construct a citizen's identity within the civil registry. Its function is not limited to attesting age for legal purposes; it also helps to distinguish homonymous individuals born or residing in the same place. In civil registration, the presence of recurring names within a community is an obstacle to the definition of unique individual identities.
- 2 Anthropological research on anthroponymy has shown that proper names are not in themselves, as a matter of fact, functional to identification. Claude Lévi-Strauss was among the first to highlight their systemic and classificatory character, whose primary effect is to assign a person a position within the social space (Lévi-Strauss 1979). Past studies on anthroponymy – such as those by Clifford Geertz (1973), Christian Bromberger (1982), Françoise Zonabend (1980), and Christiane Klapish-Zuber (1980) – have analyzed «systems of naming» (Bromberger, Solinas 1983) mainly for their contribution to the symbolic construction of the community. Drawn from cultural repertoires of various kinds – religious, kinship-based, political, cosmological – proper names appear primarily oriented toward recognizing membership in a community or social category, or recognizing one's position in a particular phase of the life cycle or in a specific condition. Names may therefore change according to successive stages of the life cycle, once again highlighting the dependence of individual identity on social recognition.

- 3 James Scott, John Theranian, and Jeremy Mathias (2002) have emphasized the contrast between these logics and the criteria of «legibility» required by the State. They have also shown how the imposition of permanent family surnames «proper to the states» (*ibidem*), and the bureaucratic practices connected to them, went together with the rise of the modern State. The adoption of surnames and their perpetuation through patrilineal filiation constituted not only a means of distinguishing different individuals within the same community, but also a way to facilitate juridical and administrative practices related to property and inheritance. The civil registration of first and last names, of parents' names, of place and date of birth, has emancipated – so to say- the recognition of the person from dependence from local communities, transforming it into an abstract, universal, identification independent of local customs as required by the bureaucratic processes of modern governmentality.
- 4 Within this framework, the date of birth plays a particular role. On the one hand, it further limits the risks of homonymy: not only given names, but also surnames and, potentially, parents' names can recur within the same community. By fixing the birth of each individual at a precise moment in what Pierre Bourdieu (2012) described as the official time of the State, the date of birth produces a distinctive trait based on reference to a universal dimension. This reference, in turn, makes it possible to define and order citizens according to “objective” age-based criteria that determine rights and duties. Compulsory schooling, vaccinations, the transition to legal adulthood with the rights and responsibilities it entails, the age limits for public and private job recruitment or for retirement, etc.: throughout a citizen's entire life, the date of birth plays a crucial role in their relationship with the State and in their access to resources, services, and rights.
- 5 At first glance, one might observe that this specific role reproduces, in the bureaucratic dimension, the well-known “anthropo-logics” (to reuse here a term by Georges Balandier) of social reproduction, where the social definition of age categories and seniority is connected to personhood. Such an observation, however, is only partially acceptable, because of the differences opposing age such as it is based on a date recorded in a State register, and age as a social construct. To make an example taken from the Ivorian context that will be discussed in the following pages, it is worth recalling that a young person who becomes a “head of household” or “village chief” by succeeding a relative, is immediately recognized as an “elder” in relation to peers who have not undergone the same change of status. Conversely, one could cite the case of someone who, despite advanced age, having had no children, is not recognized as a full-fledged “elder”. In conclusion, what we will call here as the “social age” of the person – that is, seniority – is defined by its recognition by the community and not by the years passed since the birth of the individual as recorded in the civil registrar.
- 6 Nonetheless, the official date of birth – and thus the official age of the individual – has important legal, administrative, and hence social consequences, affecting his or hers «social becoming» (Vigh 2010). This happens for instance when, due to personal vicissitudes, he or she has passed the legal age limits for recruitment in the public sector. In cases such as this, legal age represents an hindrance to what, in Ivorian popular discourse, is defined as the “*réussite*” (that is “success”; see Banégas, Warnier 2001) of the person. Such an obstacle must be dealt with to restore social becoming. Ivorian civil society has thus equipped itself to domesticate the bureaucratic and administrative functioning of the State, in order to re-establish a morally more

congruent relationship between time and the social becoming of person. As we shall see, this domestication does not take the form of opposition or contestation of the State itself. The «autonomy of African societies», as Jean-François Bayart has defined it (Bayart 2013: 294, see also Bayart 2008), expresses itself in the tactical use of the State's juridical-bureaucratic apparatuses. It results, namely, in a “bottom-up” appropriation of the civil registry and identity documents, which makes it possible to restore social reproduction on the basis of shared moral criteria. In the following pages I will engage into the ethnographic analysis of an (il)legal readjustment of identities and ages that in Côte d'Ivoire is known as the “*René Caillié*” arrangement (Banégas, Cutolo 2024)¹.

2. René Caillié in Côte d'Ivoire

- 7 René Caillié is generally known as the French explorer who in 1827-1828 travelled from Senegal to Timbuktu disguised as a Muslim. After having visited Timbuktu he returned safely to France, where he wrote a book on his explorations obtaining an important prize from the *Société de Géographie*. Today, in Côte d'Ivoire, “*René Caillié*” is the popular nickname given to bearers of counterfeit identities (Banégas *et al.* 2021; Banégas, Cutolo 2024). As it often happens with sardonic Ivorian popular nicknames, the expression “*René Caillié*” can be understood referring to multiple layers of meaning. Recalling the person of the French explorer, it alludes to the tactic use of a disguised identity. But at the same time, the surname “*René*” brings into play a further, implicit meaning, as it is phonetically and graphically identical to the word “*rené*”, meaning “reborn” in French. This refers, in turn, to the quite common practice of lowering one's age for administrative and legal purposes – so to overcome the age-limits for enrollment in secondary school or for recruitment in the army. It refers, in other terms, to a “paper rebirth” that is obtained by making a new (and of course, illegal) civil registration under a new name and with a new date of birth.
- 8 The new demand for registration is presented by the applicant (or often by one of his/her parents) as a belated declaration of birth that must be approved by a judge. Since regular birth registration is limited in Côte d'Ivoire, administrations are used to this special procedure, which is known as “*jugement supplétif*” (a belated procedure of registration). It can take some time and can be relatively expensive, if compared to regular registration – especially if it requires, as it sometimes does, corruption. But at the end, a refreshed, younger identity is disposable for the applicant, while the older ID document is abandoned or given to an older relative who also needs to “become younger” for some reason.
- 9 I've discovered the importance of the diffusion of the “*René Caillié*” arrangement in March 2018, while carrying research on the social life of identity documents in the *pays Annò*, a quite out-of-the-way rural area in the center-east of Côte d'Ivoire. After an interview with a villager on the difficulties of obtaining the national ID card (*Carte nationale d'identité*) and the problems that this causes, my research assistant and close friend Adama explained to me that the name on his ID card was not his own, but the name of a relative. He made this confession with an amused but at the same time embarrassed expression, adding that he was «a *René Caillié*». I had always called him by the name of Adama, just like his relatives and all the people who knew him well did. I was aware that such a name was different from the one written on his ID card, but I considered the latter to be his “real” – i.e. official – name: Nguessan Kofi Souleymane.

This was a typical Anno name, where Akan and Muslim forms are mixed: the father's name, used as patronymic (here, "Nguessan") is followed by a personal name connected to the local ritual calendar ("Kofi") and by a second personal name showing conversion to Islam (here, "Souleymane"). Hence, until I was told about it, I thought that "Adama" was just a nickname given to my friend when he was a kid, and that such a nickname had continued to be used by his relatives and friends. But in fact, Adama was his "real" name. To be precise, it was the Muslim name he had been given at birth. Indeed, he should have been declared as Dongo Kuaku Adama at the registrar, because this was the name given to him by his father. But nor this name nor its bearer were ever registered, since no declaration of birth was made for Adama.

- 10 Not having been declared at birth, and having grown up without having an official identity, Adama was given the birth certificate of his maternal uncle Nguessan Kofi Souleymane, so that he could attend secondary school. The passage was helped by the fact that nephew and uncle were roughly of same age, as can happen in families where polygamy is frequent. Adama explained to me that his uncle Souleymane, having failed several times in primary school, had become too old to be accepted by a "*collège*". Hence, his father (who was Adama's maternal grandfather) decided to establish for him a new identity, pretending that his son had never been registered and applying for a *jugement suppletif* [suppletive judgment]. In this new registration under a new name, the year of birth was postponed of three years. Nguessan Kofi Souleyman become thus Nguessan Kofi Amadou for the Ivorian state.
- 11 The original identity of Souleymane having become useless – a legal identity with nobody to bear it – his father, who at that time was the head of the compound where the two boys lived, decided that such a resource shouldn't be wasted. In the case of another unregistered relative needing an official identity, it would have been cheaper and easier to use the already existing one, instead of making a trip of seventy kilometers on a muddy track to the civil registrar of Prikro (the administrative regional center) and start the complex procedure needed to obtain a *jugement suppletif*. Adama was a perfect candidate for receiving the vacant ID: not having been registered by his father, he had begun to have trouble in his application for secondary school. So, Souleymane's birth certificate (*extrait de naissance*) was passed to him: Dongo Kuaku Adama thus became Nguessan Kofi Souleymane. The shift of identity happened of course only in the realm of law: Adama continued to be named as such by his relatives, and he still does, even now he lives in Abidjan.
- 12 Adama's legal identity was a by-product, a secondary consequence of the "paper rebirth" of his maternal uncle Souleymane, who needed a younger identity to go continue his instruction. Souleymane (the original) was only a "distant" maternal uncle, not a "real" one: he was not the full brother of Adama's mother, but the son of the second wife of her father. In the context of Anno society, where matrilineal descent still plays an important role in the reproduction of identities (Cutolo 2015a), this meant that taking Souleymane's official identity Adama was in theory disconnected from his matrilineal descent group. But what could have appeared difficult when following a principle of legibility where each individual should have a unique, invariable, identity (Scott 1998; Scott *et al.* 2002) – wasn't so for Adama and his family: the kinship relations printed on official documents and ID cards were apparently considered as mere instruments to navigate administrative life and to pass police roadblocks. ID cards were considered extrinsic to the social truth of kinship relations, as these could only be

recognized by the community. Anyway, it has to be considered that today matrilineal succession depends on arrangements that are made between relatives, independently from (and often in spite of) civil law on inheritance.

- 13 In the case of Adama as in many other similar Ivorian cases, we are confronted with arrangements that bend the use of identity documents following the moral relations of authority and dependence structuring domestic units. They can be conceptualized as practices that take place within a specific moral economy of identification. The concept of moral economy is appropriate, here, because of its constitutively relational character. It allows us to represent the awareness, in the acting subject, of the coexistence of opposed logics and ethos, the juridical-administrative and the popular, that in actual social life are experienced together and tactically combined. In other terms, the concept of moral economy allows us to address the networks of exchanges and the negotiations connecting legal procedures and administrative norms to actual (illegal) practices and informal arrangements. These connections must be seen as constituents of the relations between the Ivorian state and Ivorian civil society; or, using Jean-François Bayart's articulation, as popular modalities of appropriation of the state (Bayart 2013).
- 14 Johanna Siméant (2010) has highlighted the risks of overstretching the concept of "moral economy", making of it an equivalent of other already existing concepts such as "values", "morality", and in some cases, "culture". Such a critical stance can be shared. Especially when Siméant insists on the need of avoiding to refer to moral economy as an explication in itself, that is, as a causal factor. It should be instead, understood as an imperative to engage in in-depth ethnographic research, understanding the meanings intended by social actors (Siméant 2010: 155-160). But it is precisely this ethnographic stance that has pushed me to see "*René Caillié*" arrangements as instances of a local moral economy, understanding the latter, with Didier Fassin, as a «regime of production, circulation and use of moral sentiments, values, norms and duties within a social space» (Fassin 2009: 1257). The "*René Caillié*", as we are beginning to see, is a popular answer to the requirements made by the state concerning the legibility of individual identities; an answer that is shaped by moral values concerning personhood on the one side, and on need to relate with the state on the other. It is an infrapolitical kind of answer, taking place in a society where is a shared conscience that, as a matter of the fact, in state laws are often unable to overcome the relations of power, subjection, and dependence that do shape "real" (that is, social) life.
- 15 Instruction and access to employment, and thus "success" in life (*réussite*), haven't much to do with the respect of formal procedure and laws; they depend on inclusion in networks of moral bonds embedded in kinship and community relation. Hence, as an informant stated explicitly, a younger brother has «the moral obligation» to cede his birth certificate or his ID card to his older brother, if the latter needs it. Since it will be your family and not the state to help you in difficult moments, it is up to elders to decide on the management and distribution of legal identities in the family. Under their authority, as we are going to see, identity documents can be treated as goods to be exchanged or distributed within the family, following members or budgetary needs. The following story comes from an upper-level state functionary:
Moi, j'avais 14 ans et je venais d'échouer pour la seconde fois. Mon père a approché le Directeur [...]. Ce dernier lui a conseillé de venir avec l'extrait de mon petit frère qui fréquentait l'école coranique. C'est avec l'extrait de ce dernier que je suis allé à

l'école. J'ai pu obtenir mon entrée en 6^{ème}, mon BEPC, mon Bac. Bon, aujourd'hui je suis habitué à ce nom» (Abidjan, 17.02.2016).

- 16 Although this story was told by a functionary in Abidjan, it could have come indeed from whatever part of the country. After the case of Adama had made me aware of their ordinariness, I have collected similar narratives in many different parts of the country together with Richard Banégas, in a shared research on ID documents carried in the frame of *La vie sociale des papiers en Afrique* research project (Banégas, Cutolo 2025). We have observed some recurring characters in these narrations: the need to lower the age of in order to continue (or not disrupting or access) a career; the widely shared opinion – as the encouragement of the school director reported above shows well – that these are morally legitimated practices; the shift of a legal identity from a younger to an older relative represented as a service due to elders, and at the same time as a rational use of resources. In the story reported above, the fact that the younger brother of the protagonist and narrator was at a Koranic school, where date of birth and legal are not important, was presented as a self-evident rationale of the passage of identity from him to his elder brother, given also the indisputable moral duty to help a *grand frère*.
- 17 It would be immoral to hinder a career, to frustrate the will of a youth to instruction, to stop the progression toward one's social destiny «just because of a piece of paper». This we were told many times. The reallocation of “papers” is thus arranged following contextual needs, aiming at harmonizing life cycles and official ages. This appropriation of legal and administrative logics “from below”, with the circumvention of norms it implies, keeps the individual *within* (and *not oppose to*) the legal frame of administrative procedures.
- 18 A further example can be seen in the story of another youth coming from Adama's village (here I will call him Kouadjo) who had already “reborn” two times and was trying to obtain a third legal identity when I met him. His first rebirth had taken place by using an identity that had been “left free” by a younger cousin, after the latter had provided himself with a new birth certificate through a new declaration of birth. The second rebirth happened when he, needing an even “younger” identity in order to apply for a job in the state sector, took the ID card of another cousin, who didn't use it as he was badly ill and bedridden. The application of Kouadjo, however, did not succeed. In the meantime, the ill cousin got unexpectedly better and his parents then asked to have his ID card back. The situation of Kouadio became difficult, because he had given his former birth certificate (the one he had taken from the first cousin) to another relative “who needed it”: now he was left without any official identity. At the time I met him, he was this applying for another *jugement suppletif* under a new name with the help of broker, in order to obtain is third legal identity.
- 19 Birth certificates and ID cards can circulate within the family, following the needs of its members, but they can also become objects of transactions binding partners of from different families. This is the case of a now retired high officer of the Ivorian army, coming from a Baule village close to the border of the Annò country (here I will call him Komenan). To be recruited by the military academy he used the birth certificate of a friend, with the approval of the latter's family. His friend seemingly «wouldn't use it», since he had left school and worked in his father's plantation. After the academy, Komenan had a brilliant career under the name of his friend. When he became a captain, the latter's mother approached him, saying that he was in debt with her for

the success he had using the name of her son, who had died few years before. After negotiation the captain paid a reasonable sum, and he renewed the payment when he eventually became a colonel. Today he is retired, but he continued to send presents from time to time to his friend's family who originally "owned" his legal name.

- 20 After my enquiry in Adama's village and in Prikro, the administrative center of the Annò country, and after having carried research with Richard Banégas in the towns Abidjan and Bouaflé on the same topic, the extraordinary extent of the presence of the *René Caillié* in Ivorian society became apparent, even though not quantifiable. Enquiring in civil registrars, it also became clear that, just as it happens with the passage of an ID card from a younger to an older relative, «administrative rebirth» (Konan 2010) doesn't necessarily involve the complicity of local bureaucrats or middlemen, but can be done following the ordinary administrative procedure. In other terms, this illegal action can be done following the legal procedure. Thus, the state apparatus can be used in order to become (illegally) younger.
- 21 From this point of view, *René Caillié* arrangements cannot be simply addressed using Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan's concept of «practical norm». Aimed at describing bureaucratic practices deviating from the official rules (Olivier de Sardan 2014; see also Bierschenk, Olivier de Sardan, 2014), the notion of «practical norm» is meant to address the routines of «regulated informality» (*Ibidem*) belonging to the local professional culture of bureaucrats. Now, the *René Caillié* scheme cannot be represented as an unconscious routine adopted by bureaucrats (who are in many cases unaware of the illegal purpose of these belated declarations of birth); it is, instead, a conscious, tactical circumvention of norms. Like bureaucratic *practical norms*, however, it does not defy legal procedures. Instead, it makes them compatible, as we are going to deepen in the following pages, with the moral values of eldership.
- 22 Due to their very high number, the *René Caillié* arrangements seem to create two coexisting levels of identity in Ivorian society – the official and the popular one. It precisely the coexistence of these two levels that makes it possible for many Ivorians to tame what would otherwise result as an immoral apparatus, hindering social becoming and thus damaging careers and lives.

3. «René Caillié» arrangements and Ivorian popular culture

- 23 Forgery of documents is quite current in Côte d'Ivoire. It concerns fake student cards and diplomas, fake driver's licences and roadworthiness certificates. It concerns also fake national identity cards, fake birth certificates and certificates of nationality. Since the Nineties, public concern about fake documents has focused mainly on nationality fraud. Described by nationalist politicians and local medias as a «theft of nationality» perpetrated by foreigners holding national identity cards, it has taken the frontstage of the public space since the rise of the nationalist ideology of *ivoirité*.
- 24 In our book on the *ID wars in Côte d'Ivoire*, written with Richard Banégas (Banégas, Cutolo 2024), we have described the struggle for citizenship that has affected the country since the second half of the Nineties. Often fought around the documents, this struggle has a long history that can't be recalled here. Nonetheless, it is important to have in mind that the issue of nationality, having long-time been caused a moral panic

concerning documents of identity, has systematically obscured the extremely widespread presence of *René Caillié(s)* in Ivorian society. This too can be seen as attesting the fact that they are generally accepted as legally and morally unharmed.

- 25 The same can be observed in the history of reforms of identification that has accompanied the long Ivorian conflict over citizenship. The creation of the *Office National de l'Identification* by Laurent Gbagbo's government in 2001, responded to Ivorian moral panic concerning nationality, and presented the modernization of registration systems as a mean to «redesign and stabilise the body of the nation» – as Gbagbo's stated in a famous speech in Figayo (Abidjan) diffused by Ivorian television. A year and a half after the ONI had been created, the headlines of the *Fraternité Matin* newspaper (N° 11276, 22/06/2002) reported how its newly established director, colonel Koné Al Moustapha, had immediately discovered «extensive frauds» concerning ID documents. Ivorian records of the *état civil* were full of irregular birth certificates following three main models: individuals having received a birth certificate without having ever been registered; different individuals possessing and using a same birth certificate; individuals having been registered many times and, consequently, having many legal identities. In this latter case, there was an implicit reference to the *René Caillié*, and every reader of the newspaper was well aware of that. An awareness, however, that was kept well confined to the sphere of national «cultural intimacy» (Herzfeld 1997).
- 26 In the same interview, colonel Al Moustapha declared that these «multiform frauds» were made possible by the poor state in which public service had been kept for years, lacking personnel and means. Playing mainly the issue of the «theft of nationality» perpetrated by strangers, he pleaded for the public acceptance of the new mass identification promoted by the ONI as the best means to prevent frauds. Proposing a statement on state and identity that could as well have been taken from Michel Foucault's or James Scott's works, his interview ended reminding that «[the state] needs to know its citizens and all the people living in its territory. [...] A modern state has to be able to identify people, and their identities must be fixed once for all. Changing identities make people inaccessible»
- 27 Although every Ivorian reader knew that the *René Caillié* arrangement surely was the most recurring one, no mention was made of it in the debate that took place in the Ivorian press during the following months. The «theft of nationality» (*le bradage de la nationalité ivoirienne*) was presented as the only apparent rationale in documentary fraud, and the narratives of “strangers” usurping Ivorian citizenship was relaunched once more by medias, feeding once more national moral panic. A good example of this were the rumors circulating in December 2008, when the newspaper *Notre Voie* (N° 3168, 20/11/2008) reported that 6.000 *extraits de naissance* were discovered having been delivered to non-Ivorians. Two months after, in an article on *Fraternité Matin* newspaper, the *sous-préfet* of the Anyama municipality Kouamé Kouadio Noël deplored the use of fraudulent birth certificates in an area where many resident “strangers”, have Malian or Burkinabé origins, connecting again false ID's with the «*bradage de la nationalité ivoirienne*» [selling off Ivorian nationality]:

La tenue des registres (par les agents véreux) a favorisé la fraude amplifiée, entretenue par un réseau constitué d'agents de la sous-préfecture, de la mairie, appuyé par des collaborateurs extérieurs fortement équipés d'encreurs, de cachets de l'état civil, de registres, d'imprimés avec des signatures falsifiées de l'administrateur en poste et de ses prédécesseurs» (*Fraternité Matin* 27/01/ 2009).

- 28 The *sous-préfet* revealed, moreover, that following an official enquiry 90% of Anyama's registers had not been copied and dispatched to state archives, and that 200 recently checked birth certificates resulted as purely forged, having no correspondent registration. Although he didn't state anything concerning the use of these forged documents, the message to the Ivorian public opinion was clear: it went without saying that forgery and frauds had the aim of obtaining certificates of nationality and, as a subsequent step, illicit electoral enrolment menacing Ivorian sovereignty. Even though public discourse on identification revolves still today around nationality and electoral matters, nearly all of the civil servants I spoke with were ready to admit that one of the major questions concerning legal identity in Côte d'Ivoire is to be found in the widespread practice of lowering one's age. Although there are no statistics on this odd subject for obvious reasons, it is common knowledge that all families in the country, even the most illustrious, have some *René Caillé* within them – up to and including in the government, where there are ministers who, at some point in their lives, have had to «cut [alter] their age». As I have said above, *René Caillé* arrangements have been kept within a «cultural intimacy» (Herzfeld 2005) that has until recently avoided their explicit mention in public domain.
- 29 There is, however, a domain where the *René Caillé* topic is overtly discussed. This is football, or, to be precise, the scandals on *René Caillé* professional football players that periodically crop up in medias. This well-known topic connects the popular imagery of football with moral narratives where personal talent and effort are seen as radically divergent from the extrinsic, formal requisite of legal age. As I have been told, for someone aspiring to a professional career in football, after long years spent working hard in football fields, and as long as he feels in the right shape, it is difficult to drop a recruitment in a European club just because of having reached a certain age. Hence, football players, helped by their managers, try to get new *jugements supplétifs* through civil registrations under new names. This periodically gives rise to scandals: in 1995, the Abidjanese football club Africa Sport, winner of the national soccer championship, was disqualified when its striker Bamba Yacouba was discovered having a double identity. He had been initially registered as Bamba Ladji. Needless to say, Bamba was older than Yacouba (his second identity). After other minor cases reported in the following years, in 2008 another famous football player, Koffi Kra Marc was to be caught in a similar affair, when an enquiry found out that he had two dates of birth. When he started his career in the ASEC, his license stated that he was born in 1983; but when he was eventually recruited in the Efym (*Ecole de football Yéo Martial*) he declared, using another document, that he was born in 1984. The *Stade d'Abidjan* football team immediately reported the fraud, but was unable to produce evidence and failed to convince the Ivorian football league. It was the JCA (*Jeunesse Club d'Abidjan*) that, thanks to a private enquiry, proved the fraud. As a consequence, the Ivorian league disqualified the Efym team, which had defeated JCA in a previous match, letting the latter play against Abidjan's Asec in the final match of the National Cup.
- 30 Similar cases have been reported in other African countries: in 2014 the famous Cameroonian striker Samuel Eto'o was suspected of having lowered his age by his trainer José Mourinho, in Chelsea football club. In 2018, ten players of Benin's national under 21 team were accused of having falsified their age with forged documents (the team being eventually debarred), and in 2019 the same problem has occurred with the under 21 Tanzanian team. What is interesting here, however, is that in Côte d'Ivoire the

social commentary on those scandals depicts only seldom this kind of fraud as a morally intolerable deed. Outside of the newspapers, where the indignation of journalists and their claim for “modernity” is displayed, the difference of «only one year» found in Koffi Kra Marc’s papers wasn’t wholeheartedly judged by many of my friends and interlocutors as a sound motivation for discarding the results of his team. On the contrary, it was the legal enquiries commissioned by opposing teams that were often depicted as a nearly immoral deed, as an unfair way of winning a match outside the football field.

- 31 It could be tempting to connect the shared acceptance of the *René Caillié* arrangements with the general lack of relevance of biological (and thus legal) age in vernacular socio-cultural systems of recognition and personhood. For many Ivorians living in rural areas, the date of birth is something that has no relevance in the representation of the self. This is what I have learned in previous research in rural areas, when collecting genealogies and making censuses of villages and households: very few people were aware of their day and year of birth. But even though this interpretation would seem to match with an apparent social *ethos*, it would be in fact misleading if transformed in a cultural account of the *René Caillié* phenomenon. Villagers of rural areas, just as city dwellers, are all very aware of the relevance of ID documents and of the role of the date of birth in it, when necessary. As a matter of fact, producing a *René Caillié* requires a basic bureaucratic competence concerning registration and the awareness of administrative implications of legal age.

4. Age, personhood and identity

- 32 As I have written above, in Ivorian society as elsewhere in Africa, in rural and urban contexts alike, age is related in complex ways with social and moral attributes defining status. The number of years having passed since birth, which is so tightly connect to individual legal identity, is usually merged within relational categories having hierarchical connotations. Vernacular lexicons of age, seniority and status do of course vary following different languages and cultural areas, as do the categories through which the life cycle is represented. The anthropological literature on this matter is so vast that trying to recall it here would out be of place. Nonetheless, it could soundly be said that, in many African societies, the moment of birth is important as it plays a role in ordering and shaping relations of seniority. Being born before or after a brother, a sister, a cousin, a member of one’s community – that is, being older or younger than someone – has consequences in terms of authority and dependence. It places the individual within a hierarchical order. But at the same time in can be said, reversely, that being placed within in hierarchical order (that is, having a status) has consequences concerning the definition of seniority, and so to socially recognized age.
- 33 Being the older brother, the elder of a group of friends or the elder of household, means being in a position of at least potential authority. In *nouchi*, Abidjan’s urban pidgin, this status is designated with the Malinke term *koro* [elder]. The popular neologism *korocratie* – the power of elders – is widely used to refer both to the authority of older brothers, friends, relatives on the one side, but also to the power of those who stand in a position of authority and/or are affluent enough to reputed as “big men”. In other terms, status, hence seniority, is thus defined by specific social features such as being in a position of wielding authority over dependents/youths and having the

means of redistributing resources. It follows that being an “elder” is not just – nor primarily or uniquely – a matter of years: it depends from the status reached by the person in its trajectory of “social becoming”. That is, in his progression towards eldership. Now, it is true that in this progression, age and advancement in status should ideally coincide. But as a matter of fact, the second, social term of the couple shows to have a predominant role in defining personhood (Balandier 1974; Meillassoux 1975, 1993; Abeles, Collard 1985; Spencer 1985; Attias-Donfut 1994; Bekombo 1994). As I have said above, a young person can become an “elder” after an appointment, a succession to office, after having become a father or after having obtained wealth; on the other side, an old person who did not have children and who did not succeed in obtaining status or wealth is just an old man and can’t be acknowledged as a “real” elder. The more social relations are removed from kinship or from the community, the more the connection between eldership and status is built independently from age. This happens, as I have said above, with the anteriority of one’s presence in a working activity. The newcoming worker in a factory, even when older than those that he finds being already there, cannot be considered as an elder in that context. Even though negotiating, he will have to recognize seniority in work. Of course, especially when the difference of age is apparent, this situation will be at odds with the morality of age, so to say, as such, possibly causing tensions.

- 34 Due to the same principle, one can be an elder in a group and a youth in another, independently from age. A good example of this can be found in Eliane de Latour’s ethnography of Abidjan’s criminal youths (de Latour 2001). In their gangs, one can be the *bon petit* [good son] of a boss, who is addressed by him as a *vieux père* [old father], and at the same time he can be the *vieux père* of a new (sub)gang created by himself, where he will have his own *bon petits*, irrespectively of individual age. This will not necessarily cause tensions, as far as respect (expressed through deference and obedience) to the first *vieux père* is duly shown. Another example can be found in the composition of militias during the Ivorian war (2002-2011; see Cutolo 2015b). Within groups of comrades-in-arms, hierarchical relations were structured in an idiom of relative seniority, connecting *vieux pères* chiefs to their *bons petits* forming their militia.
- 35 The militias were generally formed by young men seeking emancipation from the cadet, subaltern, status experienced in their social milieu. Paradoxically, being recruited they found themselves in a cadet position within a new context, depending on new *vieux pères*. The paradox, however, is only apparent, because in the new social context of the militia they were able to reestablish trajectories of promotion toward seniority, where the skill in the handling of weapons, the exercise violence and the courage shown in battle provided social recognition (Cutolo 2015b). Within this form of violent meritocracy, the status of *vieux père* was conferred upon those who, through accomplished feats and accumulated prestige, succeeded in gathering a group of followers (*bons petits*) that constituted their capital of social and military force – what in Abidjan slang *nouchi* is referred to as *gbonhi* (Banégas 2010). Thus, as social time takes over abstract time and social age takes over the age of the individual, one can be a father-elder [*vieux père*] in a context and at the same time a son-cadet [*bon petit*] in another. But it must also be said that, ideally, individual age should progress together with social age. Some concordance between social and individual age is expected, and this expectation can give rise to painful contradictions, as it happens with those who,

being excluded from the access to social resources the bring towards seniority, confront themselves with the risk of “staying young” in spite of age.

- 36 Anthropological scholarship has shown that many African representations of the person, albeit differences due to the different socio-cultural backgrounds, seem to converge in representing the latter in processual terms (Comaroff, Comaroff 2012). That is, as something that should be kept in a constant condition of social becoming, in the frame of a progression leading the subject to «the conquering of eldership» (Meillassoux 1995). In this becoming, congruence between individual time and social time is highly desirable and must be kept at all costs. If we think to the Ivorian malfunctioning of institutions and the braking it causes to careers – as, for instance, the long strikes in schools causing the “*années blanches*” – it is easy to see that individual legal age stands in contrast with the progression towards eldership and that its restoration becomes necessary.
- 37 Now, the social time of seniority and eldership has a shared, intersubjective dimension. Legal age, instead, being based just on a written record referring to an abstract time, has no social reality of its own. It can be adjusted to reestablish congruence with social age when needed. In other terms, if social seniority is to be reached by social means in social time (that is, in a progression that is defined by the changings of status), individual legal age becomes a danger, as it progresses in a time dimension which is not socially determined nor subjectively controlled. Lowering it by paper-based procedures restores the possibility of building a congruence that participates to the construction of personhood. It avoids the entrance in an «existential moratorium» (Vigh 2010) where the progression towards eldership would be disrupted by extrinsic, bureaucratic, rules that have to be tamed and moralized. After all, in Côte d’Ivoire everybody knows that many important *fonctionnaires* – businessmen, ministers, high-officials-- «wouldn’t be where they are» had they respected the age-limits set by the administrative-legal system for instruction, recruitment etc. Their *réussite* after a “paper rebirth” authorizes the morality of the *René Caillié* arrangements.

5. Conclusion

- 38 The popular mode of appropriation of the *état civil* and of individual legal identity just described has a long history French West Africa. Historians have brought to light that the use of belated declarations of birth in order to lower age has been widespread since late colonialism. In the Fifties, as Frederick Cooper (2012) has shown, when colonial governmentality started to extend registration the African populations, it became progressively clear to state officials «that Africans were using the *état civil* in their own way, when they wanted it, for what they wanted» (*Ibidem*: 401). The *état civil* rapidly became an important legal instrument in the hands of the natives in order to claim their rights of access to instruction opportunities and other services offered by the state. In Côte d’Ivoire, between 1954 and 1957 the declarations of birth *post facto* requiring à *jugement suppletif* largely exceeded regular declarations (Konan 2010). And when, in the same years, instruction was extended, civil servants and administrators themselves did sometimes “arrange” the ages of an entire class of children in order to admit them at primary school (Barré 2018: 28).
- 39 Notwithstanding the transformations that Ivorian society went through since these late colonial years, the tactic use of the *état civil* as an instrument for obtaining rights at the

expense of legibility is still widespread. The *René Caillié* arrangements can thus to be considered as an instrument apt to moralize the management of identities “from below”. They cannot be represented simply as illegal overturns of the principle of civil registration. They are components of a popular mode of appropriation of the state where the legal construction of identity is hybridized with the moral sentiments, values and duties stemming from Ivorian civil society. Through their working, congruence between aging and social age is restored. Although these “practical arrangements” apparently counter the principles of legibility presiding over the good functioning of the state, they are in fact constitutively connected to it, taming and moralizing its bureaucratic procedures and its construction of the identity of citizens.

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NOTES

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ABSTRACTS

In Côte d'Ivoire, the state production of ID documents has to face the common practice of lowering one's age for administrative and legal purposes. This is done by making a new illegal registration at the civil registrar under a new name and with a new date of birth. In Ivorian popular culture, identities having passed through this kind of "paper rebirth" are known as "*René Caillié*", referring to the French explorer who in 1828 reached Timbuktu disguised as an Arab literate. The article shows that the *René Caillié* arrangements cannot be represented just as illegal overturns of the laws of civil registration. They are part of a popular mode of appropriation of the state, where the legal construction of identity is hybridized with the moral values stemming from Ivorian civil society. Through them, congruence between legal age and social age is restored, taming abstract bureaucratic procedures that would otherwise hinder the personhood of many Ivorians.

In Costa d'Avorio, la produzione statale di documenti d'identità deve fare i conti con la pratica comune di ridurre l'età anagrafica per scopi amministrativi e legali. Ciò avviene tramite una nuova registrazione illegale allo stato civile, con un nuovo nome e una nuova data di nascita. Nella cultura popolare ivoriana, le identità costruite con questo tipo di "rinascita burocratica" sono conosciute come "*René Caillié*", in riferimento all'esploratore francese che nel 1828 raggiunse Timbuctù e riuscì ad entrarvi grazie al fatto di essersi travestito da letterato arabo. L'articolo mostra come questi espedienti non possano essere considerati semplicemente come violazioni delle leggi sulla registrazione civile. Essi fanno parte di una modalità popolare di appropriazione dello Stato, in cui la costruzione giuridica dell'identità si ibrida con i valori morali derivanti dalla società civile ivoriana. Attraverso di essi viene ripristinata la congruenza tra età legale ed età sociale, addomesticando l'astrazione di procedure burocratiche che altrimenti ostacolerebbero il processo di costruzione della persona.

INDEX

Parole chiave: identificazione e persona, burocrazia, economia morale, stato, cultura popolare

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