

Protocol, Politics and Patriotism: Staging the Jubilee of Independence in Gabon

Christine Fricke¹

¹Johannes Gutenberg University, Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Mainz, Germany

frickec@uni-mainz.de

In 2010 Gabon celebrated its 50th anniversary of independence. In addition to the usual annual Independence Day rituals, such as presidential addresses, military and cultural parades and the ceremonial laying of wreaths, this year's jubilee also offered a variety of exceptional art performances, museum exhibitions and cultural events as well as different symbolic and iconographic productions. Being staged as a major media event, the festivities aimed at strengthening citizens' national pride and created the image of a refreshed and dynamic nation. The jubilee thus not only invoked the past and present of the nation but also projected future visions of an emerging Gabon, closely tied to the political program of the new government. At the same time, however, the festivities provoked critics to express alternative ideas of the nation and to debate contested national narratives by remembering forgotten heroes, celebrating popular forms of national identity and imagining a different future. Drawing on ethnographical data from field work during the jubilee, the paper explores how public rituals, political messages and popular festivities were staged "from above" and interpreted, redefined or rejected "from below".

