

“Independence is Not Given, It is taken”. Narratives of the Nation’s Liberation 50 Years after Independence in Côte d’Ivoire.

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The commemoration of 50 years of independence in Côte d’Ivoire fell into tensed times. After almost eight years of civil war, that divided the country in a rebel-held North and the government-kept South, the year 2010 not only witnessed the celebration of 50 years of independence, but also the first nationwide presidential elections, that allowed the formerly disqualified candidate of the “North” to run for presidency. The election campaigns overshadowed the festivities and in some ways hijacked the jubilee, which became more and more politically exploited as elections approached. A leitmotif of the political hostage-taking of memory both in the commemoration of independence and in election campaigns was the question who was to claim the heritage of late Félix Houphouët-Boigny, first president of Côte d’Ivoire. Houphouët-Boigny, who made his country the model of *la francafrique*, has equally been contested as affirmed by his successor Laurent Gbagbo, who entered power with a program questioning the close relations to France and the “so-called independence” as a fake independence, while “real independence” was yet to be achieved. The activities marking the 50th birthday of this “independence in the making” were very much focused on the future. But the old heroes, who seemed to have been forgotten by this jubilee of renaissance, entered the discourse through the back door of election campaigns. The central program of the country’s festive activities was an international conference on African independences, which was supposed to bring up a “new Africa” that was going to “resist approaches of re-colonization”. Left-governed Côte d’Ivoire and its “war of liberation” were supposed to be the trailblazers for the entire African continent. These narratives have been highly contested by the opposition, namely the leaders of the RHDP (Rassemblement des Houphouëtistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix), Henri Konan Bedié and Alassane Ouattara, who not only boycotted the festive ceremony, but also made their followers refrain from any participation in the colloquium and encouraged their youths to engage in counter-festivities, such as an ironic award-ceremony for “national heroes” organized by the Coalition pour le Changement (a youth-association close to Ouattaras party).