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Abou B. Bamba  
*Gettysburg College*

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# At the Edge of the Modern?: Diplomacy, Public Relations, and Media Practices During Houphouët-Boigny's 1962 Visit to the United States

## **Abstract**

Toward the end of the first decade after the decolonization of most African countries, there emerged a scholarly polemic about the weight of bureaucratic politics in the making of foreign policy in the Third World. A mirror of the reigning modernization paradigm that informed most postwar area studies and social sciences, the discussion unintentionally indexed the narcissism of a hegemonic discourse on political development and statecraft. Graham Allison and Morton Halperin—the original proponents of the bureaucratic model—implied in their largely U.S.-centric model that such a paradigm was not applicable to non-industrialized countries since the newly decolonized countries, for the most part, lacked the institutional/organizational base and political tradition needed to conduct a modern foreign policy. Félix Houphouët-Boigny—leader of the newly independent Ivory Coast—was hardly mentioned in the scholarly debates on the bureaucratic model. Yet one can use the conjuncture of his visit to the United States in May 1962 to explore the arguments developed by the protagonists in the polemic that ensued the publication of the Allison-Halperin theory.

## **Keywords**

Félix Houphouët-Boigny, 1962, Allison-Halperin theory, Africa

## **Disciplines**

African History | African Languages and Societies | History

## **At the Edge of the Modern?**

**Diplomacy, Public Relations, and Media Practices during Houphouët-Boigny's 1962 Visit to the U.S.**

Abou B. Bamba  
Gettysburg College

Toward the end of the first decade after the decolonization of most African countries, there emerged a scholarly polemic about the weight of bureaucratic politics in the making of foreign policy in the Third World. A mirror of the reigning modernization paradigm that informed most postwar area studies and social sciences, the discussion unintentionally indexed the narcissism of a hegemonic discourse on political development and statecraft.<sup>1</sup> Graham Allison and Morton Halperin—the original proponents of the bureaucratic model—implied in their largely U.S.-centric model that such a paradigm was not applicable to non-industrialized countries since the newly decolonized countries, for the most part, lacked the institutional/organizational base and political tradition needed to conduct a modern foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Félix Houphouët-Boigny—leader of the newly independent Ivory Coast—was hardly mentioned in the scholarly debates on the bureaucratic model.<sup>3</sup> Yet one can use the conjuncture of his visit to the United States in May 1962 to explore the arguments developed by the protagonists in the polemic that ensued the publication of the Allison-Halperin theory.<sup>4</sup>

The choice of Houphouët-Boigny for such exploration is important on more than one account. Usually seen as a conservative in African politics, the Ivorian leader was reportedly a traditionalist who treated “foreign policy as his personal domain.”<sup>5</sup> Described as a “deceptively ruthless autocrat,” *Le Vieux* (i.e., Old Wise Man) apparently

“allowed no place in Ivorian newspapers for criticism or close analysis of his policies or personality.”<sup>6</sup> Even more, he is said to have harbored a deeply seated mistrust for modern mass communication techniques, especially their power in the international arena.<sup>7</sup> All of these scholarly imaginaries make the Ivorian leader one of the most fitted candidates for an historical study that attempts to link the discourse on (political) modernization to media practices and the making of African diplomacy.

While the American trip of Houphouët-Boigny had certainly economic imports, I limit my inquiry into the ways in which the presidential voyage was diplomatically orchestrated.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, at a time when Euro-American governments, foundations, and even the United Nations were all trying to set up training programs to instill “basic concepts of protocol, chancery, and diplomacy” to the elite representatives of the African countries, it might be insightful to assess the political assets and cultural capital that the Ivorians mobilized in order to shape the design of the trip.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, it seems crucial to uncover the role that the media played in constructing the meaning of the presidential journey. In an epistemological context then (and still) marked by polarization and binary opposition between a “modern” West and Africa as its “absolute other,”<sup>10</sup> what does the making of the historic voyage tell us about our analytical categories in comparative media and international historical studies?

As I explore these issues I argue that unlike the then pervasive modernization theory paradigm, African governments had appropriated a form of managing foreign public affairs that satisfied the logic of media performance of modern nations. If anything, the interwar and postwar nationalist upheavals in Africa provided a training ground for the likes of Houphouët-Boigny who readily appropriated Euro-American

forms of political performance to advance their agenda in the public (transnational) sphere. As a consequence, they ultimately helped in speeding up the decolonization process in the 1950s and thereafter.<sup>11</sup> Whereas *Le Vieux* and his envoys clearly displayed dexterity all along Houphouët-Boigny's first post-independence visit to the United States, I suggest that mass communication outlets—as quintessential tools of modern transnationalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—played an equally critical role in the performance of this singular moment in transnational statecraft. Journalists not only reported on the trip, but in the very act of reportage also attempted to shape the making of the transatlantic diplomatic spectacle. In many ways, the media treatment of the voyage in the columns of *Abidjan Matin*, *Fraternité*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Le Monde* could be seen as a microcosm of the uneasy triangular relations that linked Ivory Coast, France, and the United States in the era of decolonization and post-independence nation-building. Analyzing this microcosm with historical hindsight, it appears that the Ivorian press particularly stood out because of its hagiographic coverage and celebration of the African head of state and his staged visit. Bringing nuance to this seeming confirmation of the radical difference of African media practices and their complicity with the state, I claim that journalists in all three countries subscribed to a “modernist” metaphysics that nurtured and was informed by the culturally chauvinistic logic of the nation-state. Consequently, I conclude that the normative comparativism that has usually sustained the historiography of international media studies is more than problematic.<sup>12</sup> Even more intriguing, as we shall see, is the place of African diplomacy in the literature on political development and modernization.

**RECASTING VISIONS & ROLES:  
STATECRAFT, MASS COMMUNICATION, AND POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN DIPLOMACY**

Ever since the formulation of the bureaucratic model of foreign relations in the early 1970s, Africanists as diverse as Christopher Hill, Olajide Aluko, Peter Schraeder have strived to show how far the Allison-Halperin thesis was misguided, at least when applied to an African context. This is so, they have explained, because there hardly exists any modern state in which the role of bureaucrats in formulating and implementing foreign policy, as a process, can be ignored.<sup>13</sup> Historically, such a conclusion does not appear farfetched. Even before the introduction of Euro-American diplomatic procedures into Africa, indigenous regional states relied on the expertise of shrewd envoys and diplomatic personnel to craft and execute foreign policies.<sup>14</sup> Working out the details of Houphouët-Boigny's visit to the United States, as we shall see later, seemed to confirm this historical insight. While Ivorian foreign policy making apparatus gave exclusive rights to the president to initiate and carry out diplomatic relations, the everyday management of foreign policy was the domain of career diplomats, journalists, and even members of Houphouët-Boigny's family.<sup>15</sup> In this light, the making of the 1962 visit would have been difficult to plan and execute without the dexterity of not only Henri Konan Bédié—Ivorian Ambassador to the U.S.—and the president's wife, Marie-Thérèse Houphouët-Boigny but also the Ivorian journalists who covered *Le Vieux*'s sortie.

Few historians of foreign relations have paid attention to the activities of African envoys or informal diplomats such as Bédié or Marie-Thérèse Houphouët-Boigny, even as recent years have witnessed a surge in scholarship attempting to transnationalize U.S. history in connection with Africa. In fact, while many scholars have unveiled the various

intriguing links that often connected the arrival in Washington and New York of diplomats from Africa with some of the most fruitful outcomes of the Civil Rights movement in the early 1960s, they have remained largely silent on the works of the African diplomats as historical actors.<sup>16</sup> Yet the African envoys and representatives in the United States were very active in the performance of their duties. Many of them, for instance, protested to American officials whenever they were the victims of racial prejudice. In other junctures, the African diplomats made “bitter jokes” about schizophrenic U.S. racial behaviors that strove to accommodate foreign black envoys while denying the same privilege to African Americans. As a result of these actions, the diplomats from Africa enjoyed a degree of visibility at the hands of contemporary journalists—a historical situation to which the historiography has not done enough justice.<sup>17</sup> Even more mesmerizing in the current transnational histories of the United States and modernization theory is the relative dearth of historical studies on how African diplomats used mass communication and public diplomacy techniques to further their objectives in their host country. This neglect is all the more surprising since most early modernization theorists who have become the subjects of recent scholarly research saw the use of the mass media by “traditional” and “transitional” societies as a significant indication and step in their drive toward modernity.<sup>18</sup>

The evidence, if scanty, is not lacking however. During the Algerian War of Independence, for instance, the North African nationalists skillfully used their representative in the United States to court American public opinion.<sup>19</sup> In a similar move, anti-apartheid movements’ *de facto* roving ambassadors and South African artists in exile cultivated U.S. audiences for their support in the struggle against the South African

government.<sup>20</sup> Communication scholars have referred to these strategic deployments of the media to advance of a group or country's foreign policy agenda as media diplomacy. From the Iranian revolutionaries to Native American activists at Wounded Knee, freedom fighters and embattled governments alike all courted the press to further their political objectives in the international arena.<sup>21</sup>

The use of mass media to garner support for a cause need not be limited to revolutionary movements and critical moments as most analysts seem to suggest. In the early 1960s, for instance, many African countries started lobbying campaigns in an effort to win U.S. financial assistance. Despite their limited budgets, newly independent countries such as Liberia, Nigeria, and Ivory Coast secured the services of U.S. public relations (PR) firms to campaign on their behalf. As a columnist of the *Wall Street Journal* put it, the goal of the foreign governments in signing their contracts with a publicity firm was to help them “cultivate the goodwill” of the American people.<sup>22</sup> The example of the Ivorian ambassador is as interesting and insightful as it gives an early indication of how African diplomats actively fashioned U.S.-Africa relations during the exciting years of the 1960s. Initially at loss in the complex maze of U.S. “big business” world, the Ivorian envoy hired the New York-based Hamilton Wright which promised to inundate the North American and European business world with ad displays of “120,000 lines monthly.” The American PR firm further reassured its Ivorian customers that it would place a “13-minute documentary film” about *Le Vieux*'s country that would be “shown on at least 60 television stations.”<sup>23</sup>

The impact of these PR campaigns is uncertain. Still, the judicious use of the mass media by African envoys and representatives in the United States might be seen as an



important component and indication of their performance of modern transnational statecraft. Mobilizing contemporaneous information technologies, entrepreneurial leaders attempted to shape events by constructing a certain image of themselves and/or their actions. As they secured the service of the mass media and channeled the activities of PR firms, African diplomats maneuvered to recast the conventional roles given them in international statecraft. With Africa in the headlines thanks to the saga of decolonization, they pushed for a reassessment of the continent in the international arena while branding their respective countries as attractive havens for foreign investment.<sup>24</sup> It was against this backdrop of toying with modern statecraft and the mobilization of the press to advance the cause of Africa that *Le Vieux* planned his voyage to the United States. Whereas the mass media was instrumental in constructing the contested meaning of the trip, it took human agency to craft the administrative and diplomatic scope of the presidential visit.

**CRAFTING THE VISIT:  
HOUPHOUËT-BOIGNY, PROTOCOL, AND THE ART OF PERSUASION**

As the Ivorian leader himself underlined it in a remark on 22 May 1962, the spring visit of that year was not his first American sortie. However, unlike earlier visits during which he had behaved in the words of Frantz Fanon as a “traveling salesman of French colonialism,” the trip in the spring of 1962 was the result of *Le Vieux*’s own scheming.<sup>25</sup> To have free hands so as to maneuver at will, for instance, the Ivorian authorities refused to rely on the U.S. government to finance and thus assert control over the presidential visit. In fact, even though the official part of the visit was to start only on May 22, Houphouët-Boigny and his party had arrived in the United States on May 9, ostensibly to cultivate American business constituencies. Anticipating the concerns of the

Department of State over the bill of such long sojourn, the Ivorian authorities offered to pay for the New York leg of the visit. Such an offer initially left many American diplomats at Foggy Bottom wondering. But in a telegram in support of the plan, the U.S. embassy in Abidjan cautioned the American officials not to “underestimate [the] importance [the Ivorian government] attache[d] to the New York stay and [the] conversations with private interests.”<sup>26</sup> As subsequent episodes would prove it, the meetings with the business world were part of the larger Ivorian strategy to enlist the support of American investors in the post-independence nation-building of Ivory Coast.<sup>27</sup>

Supplementing the economic aspect of the trip was the public relations coup that Houphouët-Boigny aimed to stage during his American visit. Although he had led his country to independence in mid-1960, *Le Vieux*'s prestige remained low among younger generations of Ivorian educated elite who were ever more critical to his political choices. Outside the Francophone world, his leadership role too was at its lowest in African politics, eclipsed by none other than the activism of Kwame Nkrumah—leader of Ghana and Houphouët-Boigny's nemesis. At home, the Ivorian president began to set up the structural basis for his “carrot and stick” politics that eventually allowed him to remain in power for more than 30 years. In the international arena, he indulged in a thoroughgoing policy of re-branding and self-fashioning that culminated with the rehabilitation of his political vision at the founding of the Organization of African Unity in 1963 at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.<sup>28</sup>

As his Africa-wide activism in the early 1960s suggests, *Le Vieux*'s voyage to Washington appeared as a strategy to re-enhance a tarnished image. To carry out this transnational PR operation, Houphouët-Boigny wanted to be the first African leader to be

invited to the Kennedy White House: “Very soon after your inauguration,” Dean Rusk reminded Kennedy during the negotiations over the administrative arrangements of the visit, “the Ivory Coast Ambassador called on instructions to ask that his President be given priority over all other African Chiefs of State in consideration for state visits to the United States.”<sup>29</sup> The request was not granted. Worse, given the high number of high profile visitors in Washington and concerns over effective time management, the Kennedy administration threatened to scale most African visiting leaders down to the status of “Presidential guests,” a new category specifically created for them.<sup>30</sup> Through the correspondence of the American chief diplomat stationed in Abidjan, it appears that the Ivorian leader rejected this option. Since his request of being the first African visitor was not possible, he insisted that his visit be a “full formal state visit.” Concurring with *Le Vieux*, Ambassador Reams added: “I know of no African Chief of State more aware of protocol and Houphouët would resent anything less than maximum effort in Washington and New York.”<sup>31</sup> Based on this assessment and the fact that Houphouët-Boigny was still viewed by American diplomats as the “most important single leader in the former French African colonies,” the Office of Protocol in the Department of State acquiesced and the Washington leg of Houphouët-Boigny’s trip was upgraded to a state visit, culminating with a an elegant state dinner at the White House.<sup>32</sup>

*Le Vieux*’s diplomatic victory, however, was mixed. Concurrent with his visit, the Ivorian leader had also hoped to receive an honorary degree from Harvard University. This, to be sure, was meant to be another ploy in his politics of self-fashioning, especially since he had always felt dwarfed by Kwame Nkrumah and Leopold S. Senghor both of whom were seen as scholar-politicians. Although Fordham University had offered to give

the Ivorian president an honorary degree, he had turned the offer down because he wanted his “degree from what he consider[ed] best university: Harvard.”<sup>33</sup> Using the auspices of his ambassador, he expressed this desire some two months before his expected visit.<sup>34</sup> In all likelihood, the Ivorian envoy anticipated the difficulties inherent in pressuring the reputed Massachusetts-based institution. Refraining from making “even [a] preliminary overture to Harvard,” as an American diplomat put it, the Ivorian ambassador thought it “incumbent” on the U.S. government to “do the groundwork so that [a] last minute appeal [would] not flounder.”<sup>35</sup> Despite the prodding of some of the American diplomats, Harvard did not seem to have been swayed. It is not clear how *Le Vieux* took this rebuttal. What is beyond doubt was the refusal on the part of the Ivorian presidential journalists to acknowledge the defeat as they went ahead to print in the columns of *Abidjan-Matin* that the president received a degree from Harvard. President Houphouët-Boigny did, in fact, obtain an honorary degree; but from the University of Pennsylvania—Harvard only allowing him to give a speech at a luncheon at the Center for International Affairs.<sup>36</sup>

As these examples demonstrate, the behind-the-scene negotiations to arrange his American trip revealed an Houphouët-Boigny obsessed with his public persona. In a context where his image was battered in the public spheres of Africa and Ivory Coast, the visit offered him an opportunity to re-brand himself. However, such political marketing was not solely his making. This becomes quite clear when we explore the role played by such diplomatic action channels as the Ivorian embassy in Washington or the office of the First Lady before and during the visit.

**NEGOTIATING THE DIPLOMATIC PUBLIC SPHERE:  
KONAN BÉDIÉ, MARIE-THÉRÈSE BROU, AND THE STATE VISIT**

It is safe to argue that the man who orchestrated much of *Le Vieux*'s visit to the U.S. was Henri Konan Bédié—Ivory Coast's first ambassador to Washington. Despite his subsequent downward spiral in Ivorian politics, Konan Bédié proved an effective ambassador in the early 1960s.<sup>37</sup> Born in the Baule region of central Ivory Coast in 1934, he attended school in the territory before moving to France to complete his education in law and economics.<sup>38</sup> During the nationalist fevers of the decade that preceded the decolonization of French West Africa, Bédié joined the leadership of the *Association des Etudiants de Côte d'Ivoire en France* (AECIF)—a metropolitan-based collective of Ivorian students in France—which he helped reorganize.<sup>39</sup> In 1958, the French empire was reinvented into a Franco-African community that gave self-governing powers to the territories in sub-Saharan Africa. As a result of these developments, Bédié returned home to serve in the local bureaucracy. Spotting his leadership skills as a potential asset, Houphouët-Boigny co-opted the young Bédié whom he sent back to France for further training in diplomacy.<sup>40</sup> It was during this stint as an intern at the French embassy in Washington that the Ivory Coast gained its independence in August 1960. Logically Bédié was appointed as the Ivorian ambassador to North America, with jurisdiction over the United States, the United Nations, and Canada.<sup>41</sup>

Houphouët-Boigny's visit to the United States provided Bédié with the opportunity to showcase his skills as mediator of *Le Vieux*'s politics of self-fashioning. Although he was the youngest diplomat stationed in Washington at the time of his appointment, Konan Bédié proved an effective negotiator and promoter of his country's image in the United States. For instance, in a still racially-intolerant federal capital, he

bought, furnished, and made the Ivorian chancery in Washington fully operational in record times. Along similar lines, he organized public gatherings at the embassy in an effort to market the Ivory Coast as an attractive tourist destination.<sup>42</sup> He deployed these skills of a salesperson during the planning and performance of the presidential visit in 1962. Not only did Bédié forcefully push for an appropriate protocol for the visit, but he prearranged numerous press conferences for the Ivorian president.<sup>43</sup> Thus, as the French ambassador in Washington would observe later, Ambassador Bédié “made sure that the press coverage [of the state visit] was the best.”<sup>44</sup>

Henri Konan Bédié was not the only asset at the disposal of the Ivorian president. If less visible in the political arena, Marie-Thérèse Houphouët-Boigny—the First Lady of the Ivory Coast—also emerged as a positive feature in the overall PR strategy of *Le Vieux*. Just like Ambassador Bédié and the president himself, Mme Houphouët-Boigny, nee Brou, was born in the Baule region of the country. In 1946 she was sent to France along with 45 other Ivorian students to complete their education. Six years later, she married Houphouët-Boigny, the man who had orchestrated the granting of the scholarships.<sup>45</sup> A socialite and witty woman, Marie-Thérèse turned out to be also a political asset for President Houphouët-Boigny, especially during *Le Vieux*’s visit in the United States in 1962.<sup>46</sup> Her beauty and elegance caught not only the attention of the media, but even the most austere diplomats seemed to have been mesmerized by her attractiveness and her stylish demeanor. The talk of the elite and diplomats during the state visit, the Ivorian First Lady occupied the limelight in the columns of the celebrity-craze American press. She and Jackie Kennedy shared the cover of *Ebony* in its summer issue following the presidential visit. *Jet* magazine similarly showcased her in the cover of its May issue while *Time* devoted several pages of its June issue to Marie-Thérèse, praising both her elegance and *joie de vivre*.<sup>47</sup> Recollecting the visit, if some time later,

an American official went as far to say that Madame Houphouët-Boigny was “one of the world’s most beautiful and best dressed women.” Hervé Alphand—the French ambassador in Washington at the time of the visit—agreed with such assessment when he partially credited the media success of *Le Vieux*’s trip to Marie-Therese’s eye-catching smile and graceful style.<sup>48</sup>



Figure 1: Elegance as Diplomatic Tool  
Source: John F. Kennedy Library

Scholars studying presidential wives and their political roles have argued that the power relations between first ladies and their husbands are not always one-directional. They have demonstrated that a first lady can be a liability if the popular perception of a president's wife is negative. In contrast, if a first lady is positively perceived in the eyes of the public, this usually translates into political gains for her husband.<sup>49</sup> While it is tempting to overstate this insight, it seems that the Boignys belonged to the latter category as the media focus on Marie-Thérèse's glamour illustrates. President Houphouët-Boigny may have used his wife's attractiveness to his advantage just as he capitalized on her chiefly origins in marrying her after the divorce from his first wife.<sup>50</sup> Despite this scheming intent, one cannot conclude to an all-powerful *Le Vieux* forcing his will on his wife. While it is clear that the Ivorian president repeatedly used his (marital or political) partners as symbolic tools in crafting his own political career, Marie-Thérèse was not necessarily a passive plaything that the Ivorian leader deployed at will during the presidential visit. If anything, there was a tacit collaboration between the president and his wife as the customary expectations from a visiting first lady merged with Marie-Thérèse's own love for social life and glamour.<sup>51</sup> An indication of this convergence was demonstrated during a luncheon party at Robert Kennedy's house. As a columnist of *Time* magazine revealed, the chatty and outgoing Ivorian First Lady not only "switched tables after every course" during the official gathering, but using her "exuberant, ultrafeminine wit," the "sensuous, luxury-loving" Marie-Thérèse Houphouët-Boigny also teased her male admirers. "Raising [their] expectations," she reportedly murmured: "I suppose I'll be in the swimming pool for dessert."<sup>52</sup>



One need not believe that the fun-loving Ivorian *Première Dame* so easily crossed the Rubicon that separates feminine charm, flirt, and promiscuity. Yet as the admiring journalist of *Time* had it in the opening paragraph of her article, it may have been the case that as part of a “new and lively generation of First Ladies,” Marie-Thérèse was indeed “adding style and spirit to statecraft from Abidjan to Washington.”<sup>53</sup> Through a reflected glory effect, to be sure, her demeanor and wit brought glamour to Houphouët-Boigny’s state visit. In a similar way, Henri Konan Bédié deployed his entrepreneurial skills to attract the American press while, at the same time, cultivating the business and political elites in New York and Washington. No wonder then that at the end of Houphouët-Boigny’s sojourn, he exulted that the Ivory Coast “has become a reality in the consciousness of the American people.”<sup>54</sup>

Arguably, the efforts of the Ivorian ambassador and the public image of the First Lady helped craft *Le Vieux*’s American voyage into a diplomatic event unmatched by other state visits undertaken by African leaders to the United States. As an analysis of the press coverage of the trip suggests, however, it was the nationalist traditions and the chauvinistic logics of the respective media outlets that eventually came to shape the meaning and the legacy of the diplomatic foray.

**ENCOUNTERING *LE VIEUX* IN THE PRESS:  
DIPLOMACY, JOURNALISM, AND THE POLITICS OF MEDIA COVERAGE**

Commenting on the nature of official foreign visits staged by the leaders of the newly independent countries in the Cold War era, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle suggested in the early 1960s that such international sorties be seen as a response to psychological demands rather than “real” diplomatic events. In recognizing this psychosocial dimension

of official foreign visits, the French historian of foreign relations perceptively pinpointed some of the subtleties of modern statecraft and its connection with international public relations.<sup>55</sup> Yet caught in the logics of an older tradition of diplomatic history, Duroselle may have missed the point that in diplomacy, the “real” and “symbolic” fused, more often than not, in the theater of performance. In fact, it is increasingly clear to students of public diplomacy that symbols as part of the diplomatic packaging and symbolic interactions in the international arena are key components of the making of a country’s foreign relations.<sup>56</sup> As the analysis of the media coverage of Houphouët-Boigny’s trip will show, however, visiting leaders do not always control the outcomes of these political performances, especially when their international sorties turn into media events.

While *Le Vieux*’s visit offered Ivorian hagiographers an opportunity to emphasize the stature of the president and polish his tarnished image, journalists in France and the United States instead opted to map out the contours of the novel triangular relations of their respective countries with the Ivory Coast. For instance, although it devoted only four articles to Houphouët-Boigny’s trip, the coverage of France’s premier newspaper *Le Monde* hardly hid the pervasive French anxiety over what its contributors perceived as a “revival of U.S. interest for Africa.”<sup>57</sup> The French columnists worried about the increasingly large number of African heads of state convening in Washington since President Kennedy’s arrival to the White House. Emblematic of this emphasis-cum-concern was how *Le Monde* began its first in-depth news coverage of the Ivorian president’s trip: “The 12<sup>th</sup> African leader to be welcomed by President Kennedy” the French newspaper started, “Mr. Félix Houphouët-Boigny—president of the republic of Ivory Coast, was received at the [U.S.] federal capital’s National Airport with all the honor due to a guest of his rank.”<sup>58</sup> More disturbing for *Le Monde* was that *Le Vieux*

broke the record for the longest stay by an African leader in the United States. Under these circumstances, the liberal-leaning Parisian daily emphatically concluded that the American authorities treated Houphouët-Boigny as a “true partner.”<sup>59</sup>

Coverage of *Le Vieux*'s trip in the U.S. print media might have added to the extant French apprehensions. In effect, while both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* highlighted the historic ties between France and its former colony, neither suggested the need for applying what might be called the “NATO courtesy,” that is, the tacit rule among the members of the Atlantic Alliance that none should infringe on the others' geopolitical spheres of influence.<sup>60</sup> In fact, the opposite was true as the *Washington Post* seemed to take some kind of delight as it repeatedly stressed the new-found friendship between the U.S. and Ivory Coast. Echoing some of the confidential observations of the diplomats at the State Department, the American journalists mapped out a triangular relationship among the United States, France, and Ivory Coast that the West Africans hoped to use to move beyond their reliance on Europe. While the Cold War context was never lost, the American media played out the card of post-colonial rapprochement between Abidjan and Washington.<sup>61</sup>

As could be expected, Ivory Coast's *Abidjan-Matin* and *Fraternité* were the most prolific in reporting on the presidential trip. With regard to the seemingly romantic triangle between Ivory Coast, France, and the United States, both Ivorian publications displayed a degree of dexterity. As they strived to maintain that Houphouët-Boigny and his wife were heirs to the French tradition of cosmopolitanism, the Ivorian print media subtly emphasized that the U.S. provided a better model for technological development.<sup>62</sup> However, it was through their glamorization of *Le Vieux* that both *Abidjan-Matin* and *Fraternité* succeeded in overcoming the tension inherent in the triangular diplomatic relations that the trip of the Ivorian president epitomized.

Glamorization, as symbolic construction of Houphouët-Boigny's authority, was carried out both by words and in images. In the news-stories, the prestige of the Ivorian

president was constructed using various modalities: association with celebrities as when the columnist of *Abidjan-Matin* mentioned emphatically that *Le Vieux*, upon arrival in Washington, was welcomed by President Kennedy “in person.”<sup>63</sup> The glamorization of the Ivorian head of state was also achieved through linguistic modalization with a recurrent deployment of such loaded adjectives as “prestigious,” “triumphal,” “luxurious,” and other positively indexed superlatives.<sup>64</sup> Even more suggestive of the image-building and glamour-seeking agendas of the Ivorian journalists was the front-page news photo of *Fraternité*, featuring Houphouët-Boigny’s tour of the U.S. federal capital.<sup>65</sup>

Scholars of visual communication have yet to settle the debates on the legibility of visual images and their argumentative values.<sup>66</sup> Few readers of the Ivorian publication, however, might have questioned the suggestive power of the Tour photo: besides the geometrical figures (triangles, squares, straight lines), showing the entire procession together with alignment of people and the waving flags all converge to produce a colorful and, most importantly, a triumphalist picture. In line with a tradition that has usually hailed leaders as if they were wrapped in a divine aura that made them irresistible, the Ivorian press painted *Le Vieux* as a celebrity-like figure who was beloved by the American public. A comparison of related visual argumentations in the American press further highlights this point. Whereas the photographic coverage in the U.S. print media focused more regularly on Mme Marie-Thérèse Houphouët-Boigny with what appears as three gendered pictures featuring her as major anchor, the Ivory Coast press turned its hagiographic gaze almost exclusively at *Le Vieux*, with almost half of all its news photographs covering the presidential visit.

Admittedly this hagiographic practice points to the collusion between the media as an institution and the Ivorian state as embodied in *Le Vieux*. More generally,

journalistic practices in Ivory Coast *seem* to single the country out as the site of media routines so different from the communicational performances in both France and the United States. Eurocentric media scholars of the Siebertian tradition would not have disagreed with such conclusion. However, as one shifts the analysis away from the journalistic coverage of the presidential trip and focuses on the deconstruction of the meta-cultural logic of news reporting, it becomes apparent that journalists in Ivory Coast, France, and the United States all subscribed to a modernist metaphysics that attempted to consolidate the position of their respective nation-states.

**BEYOND THE NEWS:  
MODERNITY AND THE NATIONALIST LOGICS OF MEDIA DIPLOMACY**

A closer look at the coverage of *Le Vieux*'s state visit reveals the intimacy between news reporting as textual practice and nationhood—posited as relentlessly negotiated textual ventures. Quite a few scholars have evoked this articulation of nationness through textuality.<sup>67</sup> Even more, it appears that journalistic performances, as technologies inscribing the “imagined community,” help the nation to implement its triple projects of political rationalization, hegemonic consolidation, and preservation of sovereignty. In this light, the glamorization of Houphouët-Boigny in the Ivorian press assumed more than a function of hagiographic capitalization. For even though *Le Vieux* would have been the first to reap the dividends of the mediatic foray into international public relations, the dissemination of his symbolic authority in the Ivorian newspapers potentially extended the reach of the “political rationality” of the nation-state that *Le Vieux* so typically personified in the eyes of the Ivorian journalists.

Mitchell Land's conclusions about how television was used in the Ivory Coast to foster modernization can provide a useful context for understanding this seeming alliance between the press and the state. In a country with more than 60 ethnicities, the media was conceived and mobilized to foster nation-building. As those in power came to fret over the idea that *Le Vieux* embodied the nation, the celebration of Houphouët-Boigny became synonymous with nation-building. For Land, such a practice led to a kind of one-dimensional thinking which he saw as rather contrary to traditional communication practices in pre-colonial Africa.<sup>68</sup> Although Land's perceptible nostalgia over the bygone palaver tree might be problematic, his insight still helps underline that media performances in the Ivory Coast were a technology of, and for, the nation-state.

A similar claim might be applicable to the United States, especially with regard to the role of the media in the emergence of the "political 'rationality' of the nation as a form of narrative."<sup>69</sup> The history of such emergence may be too tortuous to outline here. With Benedict Anderson, however, one can observe that "from the start the nation was conceived in language, not in blood."<sup>70</sup> Even more enlightening is how replete with gendered metaphors the language of nationalism has always been. Vicente Rafael has shown this in the case of the United States' pro-imperial nationalism in his account of U.S.-Filipino colonial encounter. In fact, more often than not, U.S. nationalism posited the colonial Other as an effeminate character awaiting conquest by the supposedly virile and more progressive U.S. culture.<sup>71</sup>

With this history in mind, the masculinist gaze of the U.S. press's visual coverage of *Le Vieux*'s voyage becomes even more significant. By focusing on the leftout signifiers of the American press reportage of the visit, Ivory Coast metonymically

emerges as a feminized subject that has to be denied to the French; a beautiful body that has to be devoured visually and consumed metaphorically.<sup>72</sup> In this light, along with the Ivorian First Lady, Ivory Coast became a malleable object upon which the U.S., as hegemon, could exercise the power of its masculinity. As they indulged in this gendered nationalist project, the U.S. press not only mapped the boundaries of the local and the foreign, but its journalists also furthered the neo-imperial project of Washington. Thus, though the 1960s witnessed a shift onto reporting in the U.S. news media as Jean Folkerts and Dwight Teeter have judiciously suggested, the cultural logic that sustained the journalistic performances of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* remained ontologically the same: to extend the imperial élan of the U.S. soft power.<sup>73</sup> Intuitive knowledge of this agenda on the part of some French politicians partly explained the obsessive suspicion of French President Charles de Gaulle and his advisors.<sup>74</sup>

French journalists too were certainly aware of the hegemonic intent of the United States as superpower. Rather than address the issue frontally in the Gaullist way, however, contributors to *Le Monde* claimed that Washington “acknowledge[d] the key role that former ‘colonial’ powers [must] play in [their] African territories.”<sup>75</sup> Earlier on, the newspaper’s *envoyé spécial* covering Houphouët-Boigny’s visit had reported along similar lines. The journalist had emphasized that in each of his meetings *Le Vieux* “never failed to stress that the U.S. assistance would *simply complement* the aid provided by the French.”<sup>76</sup> There are grounds to believe in the observation of *Le Monde*’s special correspondent. In fact, career diplomats in the United States had recognized as early as 1961 that France would have to “carry the main burden and responsibility for Ivory Coast development.”<sup>77</sup> Still, unlike the French journalists, the U.S. authorities assumed that the

Ivorians wished to “broaden their contacts and assert a more independent role.” It is certainly in this light that the first objective of the U.S. aid program to the Ivory Coast was to “[s]how the non-colonial U.S. interest in Ivory Coast economic development.”<sup>78</sup> Taking the “hot peace” between the U.S. and France in the 1960s and the decolonization of Africa as historical backdrops, the journalists’ downplaying of U.S. hegemonic design appears as a strategy mobilized by *Le Monde* to reassure its French readers over the emasculation of their “imagined community” and the mandarins who oversee its interests in the *pré carré*.

#### CONCLUSION

In hindsight, the outcomes of Houphouët-Boigny’s first official trip to the United States were significant in reinforcing the subsequent U.S.-Ivory Coast relations. During the tumultuous 1960s, however, diplomats from the Ivory Coast, France, and the United States continued to argue over the political meaning of the visit. Whereas all agreed that *Le Vieux* came off the visit satisfied, some sources suggested that he left Washington with fewer economic promises than anticipated.<sup>79</sup> My intention in this article was not to settle such a dispute. Nor was I interested in assessing the huge bill that such trip might have required on Ivorian public finances.<sup>80</sup> Rather, I meant to complicate the story of modern statecraft and diplomacy as applied to the making of U.S.-Africa relations. By focusing on the state visit of Houphouët-Boigny, I wanted to showcase some of the entrepreneurial skills of African diplomats and heads of state in the aftermath of colonial rule and suggest how effective they were in mobilizing the mass media and the larger PR techniques to further their objectives. As African leaders indulged in self-fashioning beyond the familiar terrain of domestic politics, they recast conventional diplomatic roles. In many ways, Houphouët-Boigny’s American sortie exemplifies this statecraft. As



this article has made it clear, however, the management of both *Le Vieux*'s image as a statesman and his staged trip were the locus of divergent interests and conflicting journalistic practices. While the Ivorian press strove to build a hagiographic picture of the trip and the African statesman himself, both the French and American media mapped out the contours of a new transatlantic world that Houphouët-Boigny's tour put into relief. Despite their difference, however, one should not lose sight of the centrality of the nation-state as the meta-cultural signifier that informed media performances in Ivory Coast, France, and the United States. As a matter of fact, the three different journalistic traditions certainly spoke three different dialects, but three dialects of the same language: that of the modern nation-state. This focus on language or the nation as textuality calls for a systematic reappraisal of the comparativist historiography on international media. Even more, the dexterity shown by Henri Konan Bédié in crafting the visit reminds us that African diplomats in Washington, D.C. and New York City were dynamic historical actors in the performance of U.S.-Africa relations.

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<sup>46</sup> Jeanne Molli, "Elegant Wife Is an Asset to President of Ivory Coast," *New York Times*, 12 May 1962, p. 12; Marie Smith, "First Lady Handy with Politics," *Washington Post*, 23 May 1962, p. D1; Winzola McLendon, "Ivory Coast's First Lady Makes Rounds," *Washington Post*, 24 May 1962, p. C24.

<sup>47</sup> "Glamorous First Ladies," *Ebony* 17, 10 (August 1962), pp. 21-28; "Reigning Beauties," *Time* 79, 23 (8 June 1962), pp. 30-39; "The 'First Lady of Africa,'" *Jet* 22, 5 (24 May 1962), pp. 14-17.

<sup>48</sup> JFK Library, Oral Histories. George L.P. Weaver, 1964; AMAE, série: Dir. Afrique & Malgache, s/série: Côte d'Ivoire, Carton 1881. Alphand to Couve de Murville, 1 June 1962.

<sup>49</sup> Christine Messiant & Roland Marchal, “Premières dames en Afrique: Entre bonnes œuvres, promotion de la femme et politiques de la compassion,” *Politique Africaine* 95 (October 2004), pp. 5-17; Gil Troy, “Mr. and Mrs. President? The Rise and Fall of the Co-Presidency,” *Social Science Journal* 37, 4 (2000), pp. 591-600; Dean K. Simonton, “Presidents’ Wives and First Ladies: On Achieving Eminence Within a Traditional Gender Role,” *Sex Roles* 35, 5/6 (1996), pp. 309-336.

<sup>50</sup> Alexandra Sage, “Premières dames et first ladies: La femme du chef est-elle le chef du chef ?” *L’Afrique politique* (1998), pp. 46-48; Grah Mel, *Houphouët-Boigny*, pp. 635-637.

<sup>51</sup> In suggesting this idea of convergence of interest, I follow the demonstrations of Gil Troy, Gary Wekkin, and others in their study of U.S. presidential couples. For details, see Troy, “Mr. and Mrs. President?” pp. 591-600; Gary D. Wekkin, “Role Constraints and First Ladies,” *Social Science Journal* 37, 4 (2000), pp. 601-610. One instance in which Marie-Thérèse seemed to have worked in tandem with *Le Vieux* to further the political goal of her husband was the creation of the Association des Femmes Ivoiriennes (AFI) in 1963. As numerous scholars have pointed out, AFI was inaugurated as a means to sideline grassroots feminist politics in post-independence Ivory Coast. The Ivorian First Lady spearheaded the formation of this organization and was its first president. For details on this point, Carlene H. Dei, “Women and Grassroots Politics in Abidjan,” in *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Gwendolyn Mikell (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. 210; Kathleen Sheldon, “AFI” in *Historical Dictionary of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2005), p. 23; Jeanne M. Toungara, “Inventing the African Family: Gender and Family Law Reform in Côte d’Ivoire,” *Journal of Social History* 28, 1 (Autumn 1994), pp. 37-61.

<sup>52</sup> “Reigning Beauties,” p. 30.

<sup>53</sup> “Reigning Beauties,” p. 39.

<sup>54</sup> “M. Konan Bédié constate que ‘la Côte d’Ivoire est devenue une réalité dans la conscience des Américains,” *Abidjan-Matin*, 9 August 1962, pp. 1 & 6.

<sup>55</sup> Jean Baptiste Duroselle, “La Politique des Etats-Unis et l’URSS,” in *Politiques nationales envers les jeunes Etats*, ed. Jean-Baptiste Duroselle & Jean Meyriat (Paris: Armand Colin, 1964), p. 54.

<sup>56</sup> Juyan Zhang, “Public Diplomacy as Symbolic Interactions: A Case Study of Asian Tsunami Relief Campaigns,” *Public Relations Review* 32 (2006), pp. 26-32; Chan Lau Kit-ching, “Symbolism as Diplomacy: The United States and Britain’s China Policy During the First Year of the Pacific War,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 16 (2005), pp. 73-92; Rick Fawn, “Symbolism in the Diplomacy of Czech President Václav Havel,” *East European Quarterly* 33, 1 (1999), pp. 1-19.

<sup>57</sup> Jean Knecht, “La Visite de M. Houphouët-Boigny à Washington coïncide avec un regain d’intérêt des Etats-Unis pour l’Afrique,” *Le Monde*, 24 May 1962, p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> Knecht, “Visite de M. Houphouët-Boigny,” p. 9.

<sup>59</sup> “M. Houphouët-Boigny a été traité en véritable partenaire par les Américains,” *Le Monde*, 30 May 1962, p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> “Ivory Coast Leader on Visit Here,” *New York Times*, 10 May 1962, p. 18; “Ivory Coast to Get U.S. Aid Increase,” *Washington Post*, 25 May 1962, p. A19. For details on the concept of “NATO courtesy,” see Marc Aicardy de Saint-Paul, *La Politique africaine des Etats-Unis: Mécanisme et conduite* (Paris: Nouveaux Horizons, 1990), pp. 3-4.

<sup>61</sup> Carroll Kilpatrick, “Ivory Coast President Greeted by Kennedy as Friend of West,” *Washington Post*, 23 May 1962, p. 2; “Ivory Coast to Get U.S. Aid Increase,” *Washington Post*, 25 May 1962, p. A19; “President Receives Africa Invitation,” *Washington Post*, 26 May 1962, p. C6.

<sup>62</sup> “Le voyage aux USA du Président Félix Houphouët-Boigny: Aujourd’hui à New York débute le séjour officiel,” *Abidjan-Matin*, 9 May 1962, p. 6; “L’Amitié américano-ivoirienne va s’incarner dans les faits,” *Fraternité*, 1 June 1962, p. 7; “Le Président Félix Houphouët-Boigny à New York,” *Abidjan-Matin*, 10 May 1962, p. 1; “Le Président Houphouët-Boigny a déjà rencontré de nombreux hommes d’affaires américains,” *Fraternité*, 18 May 1962, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> “John Kennedy accueille le Chef de l’Etat à Washington,” *Abidjan-Matin*, 23 May 1962, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> “Depuis mercredi, le Président Houphouët est l’hôte officiel des Etats-Unis,” *Fraternité*, 11 May 1962, p. 3; “L’Amitié américano-ivoirienne va s’incarner dans les faits,” *Fraternité*, 1 June 1962, pp. 3-9; “Weekend de repos aux USA pour le Chef de l’Etat avant d’être reçu à Philadelphie,” *Abidjan-Matin*, 19 May 1962, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> For the Tour photo, see *Fraternité*, 1 June 1962, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Messaris, *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997); David Fleming, “Can Pictures Be Arguments?” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 33 (Summer 1996), pp. 11-22.

<sup>67</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 22-36; Homi Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>68</sup> Mitchell Land, “Ivoirien Television, Willing Vector of Cultural Imperialism,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 4, 1 & 2 (Summer/Fall 1992), p. 25.

<sup>69</sup> Bhabha, “Introduction,” in *Nation and Narration*, p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 145.

<sup>71</sup> Vicente Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 54-56.

<sup>72</sup> This Derridean reading of global news follows the works of Jaap Van Ginneken. For details, see his *Understanding Global News: A Critical Introduction* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998).



<sup>73</sup> On the shift in news reporting in the United States, see Jean Folkerts and Dwight L. Teeter, Jr. *Voices of a Nation: A History of Mass Media in the United States* (New York: McMillan, 1989), p. 483.

<sup>74</sup> Durand, *Afrique et relations franco-américaines*, pp. 395-439.

<sup>75</sup> Knecht, "Visite de M. Houphouët-Boigny," p. 9.

<sup>76</sup> "Houphouët-Boigny a été traité en véritable partenaire," p. 7 (Emphasis added).

<sup>77</sup> USNA, 770M.5-MSP/8-1161. Abidjan to Secretary of State, 10 August 1961.

<sup>78</sup> USNA, 770M.5-MSP/8-1161. Abidjan to Secretary of State, 10 August 1961.

<sup>79</sup> JFK Library, NSF, Box 385A, Memorandum of Conversation, 5/24/62; USNA, 611. 70M/8-1662, Abidjan to Secretary of State, 16 August 1962; AMAE, série: Dir. Afrique & Malgache, s/série: Côte d'Ivoire, Carton 1881. Washington to Paris, 24 May 1962.

<sup>80</sup> For a current assessment of the economics of PR and state branding in Francophone Africa, see Christophe Champin, "Le pactole de la communication en Afrique francophone," *Cahiers du journalisme* 9 (Fall 2001), pp. 206-216.