

# H-Net Reviews

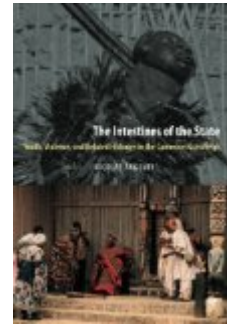
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nicolas Argenti. *The Intestines of the State: Youth, Violence, and Belated Histories in the Cameroon Grassfields*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. xviii + 362 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-02611-4; \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-02612-1.

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Published on H-Childhood (December, 2008)

Commissioned by Patrick J. Ryan



## Masks, Memory and Power in Central Africa

Nicholas Argenti has written a compelling account of masking traditions in the *Grassfields of Cameroon*, and of the ways in which both history and modern social relations are reflected, subverted, and obscured when masks are used in community performances in that region. His book examines the history of this part of southern Cameroon, and in particular three constituent periods in a history of human exploitation in the region: a turbulent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century era of slave-raiding and the imposition of kingly control; the brutalities of German and French colonial rule, at times equating to a de facto continuation of enslavement; and the exploitation and hypocrisies of postcolonial Cameroonian society until the present.

Argenti makes the claim that Oku mask performances, and the excitement, abject fear, and hilarity that they engender, involve representations of this turbulent history—not in any straightforward fashion, but as a sort of “bubbling-up” of repressed and denied memories, as well as through the menacing recollection of the powers of elites. Masking and mask performances thus become a site of contest, a set of acts that chiefs and important people use to remind the populace of social hierarchy and the power that lies behind that hierarchy, while marginalized people—and especially the “youth” noted in the book’s title—use the shelter of masking to put forward their own claims for a place in the community.

In recent African ethnography and history, the con-

cept of “wealth in people” has been adopted as an influential interpretive stance, reconciling the emphasis in many African communities on the accumulation of allies and dependents with resistance to the penetration of capitalist value systems.[1] This concept of “wealth in people” is often evaluated positively by researchers: as indigenous, comparatively heterarchical, comparatively nonexploitative, with an emphasis on the strategies that chiefs and other leaders use to attract and retain the allegiance of followers. Of course, “wealth in people” may on first reading have very different connotations, notably so in a continental history of enslavement and colonial and postcolonial exploitation.

Argenti’s book provides a striking account of the exploitative possibilities of “wealth in people.” For every leader and elder who was able to accumulate wives, children, clients, and other dependents as wealth and a vehicle toward further wealth, there would inevitably have been men deprived of the possibility of marriage, family life, and social adulthood and the respect that goes along with it. In Oku and in many other African societies, these marginalized men were forced into the ambiguous status of “youth,” or “cadets,” to use Argenti’s alternative term. Youth were (and are) even as biological adults faced with the choice between continuing economic, social, and political subordination to married chiefs and elders in their own communities, or displacement into a precarious and often violent “floating population” in the Grassfields region. Women had even fewer choices, with greater sub-

ordination to men within their communities and a more precarious situation in the wider world—in modern urban areas, for example, where socially legitimated roles for rural women are far more restricted than is the case for men.

Reference to modern situations is appropriate at this point, as Argenti effectively frames the precolonial and colonial past in relation to recent political events in Cameroon, making connections between the roles of dispossessed and rootless “youth” in the origins of Oku political dynasties among slave-raiding groups, in the *tapenta* disturbances of the German colonial period, and even in the “*villes mortes*” (“ghost towns”) strikes of the 1990s against the ruling Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement. While this account is exceedingly powerful, it might have been extended by further reference to the voluminous historical and anthropological literature on these hierarchical relations in Central Africa broadly defined.

These macro-level accounts of regional history are used to inform Argenti’s micro-level interpretations of specific characteristics of Oku masking traditions. Evaluation of the accuracy of these interpretations is difficult, because of the author’s approach to analysis: when performances are held to be aporistic, paradoxical, reflexive, dissimulating, with meanings only partly intentional on the part of performers, any such interpretation must necessarily be partial and somewhat individualized. To this reviewer, some elements of this interpretation seem more convincing than others. Argenti effectively argues for a very significant contrast in palace and village masking performances, with the palace masks deployed to obscure historical power relations while at the same time using the associations of that power to intimidate com-

mon people. Village masks are used to call attention to memories of exploitation, and also of resistance to that exploitation. On the other hand, some details of this exegesis seem forced: the identification of certain roles played during a ruler’s inauguration as representing both slaves and twins (pp. 142-147), for example, or the specific meanings signaled by palace masks like Mabu, attempting to shift blame for the activities of slave dealers to a xenophobic condemnation of foreigners and “youth” (pp. 63-65).

One signal problem with the marriage of an overarching (and very sophisticated) historical framework and an interpretive stance that privileges aporia and paradox is that almost any behavior can be located in the historical framework with the proper interpretive transformations. Evaluations of individual interpretations may thus differ. That being said, Argenti’s overall historical and interpretive model is convincing and powerful. *The Intestines of the State* is a fascinating examination of masking performances in Cameroon and their connection to regional histories and modern circumstances, as well as a very significant addition to the literature on social relations between dominant and subordinated groups in Central Africa. In a research milieu arguably still too preoccupied with the histories of elites, this book should remind researchers of the hierarchies that such elites controlled, and the precariousness of life for “youths” who found themselves permanently installed on the lower rungs of those hierarchies.

#### Note

[1]. Jane Guyer, “Wealth in People, Wealth in Things—Introduction,” *The Journal of African History* 36 (1995): 83–90.

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**Citation:** Scott MacEachern. Review of Argenti, Nicolas, *The Intestines of the State: Youth, Violence, and Belated Histories in the Cameroon Grassfields*. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. December, 2008.

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