To deny death: Succession rites among the Wè/Guéré, Canton Boo, Western Côte d'Ivoire

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Abstract. Wè-speaking people in Canton Boo in western Côte d'Ivoire make symbolic claims on immortality by a number of cultural representations that deny death. Two principal forms of such denials are succession rites and masked personnages. For men and women of accomplishment, succession rites enact the prompt replacement of the social identity forfeited by the deceased. Masked personnages, characterized as immortal beings originating in ancestral time, perform at major funerals yet within their ritual frame, death cannot be mentioned. The author proposes that community sharing in symbolic immortality epitomized by masked rituals helps account for the persistent support of masking in this region.

The elaboration and complexity of African funerals have led scholars to ask what problems mortuary rites are designed to solve. Most attention by anthropologists has been given to the necessary reallocation of rights and duties among the surviving kin and social groups (e.g. Goody 1962), to the establishment of an ancestral identity for the deceased (e.g. Jackson 1977), and to the people's psychological adjustment to death (For a review of these studies see Riesman 1986).[1] Funerals among the Wè-speaking people of Canton Boo (pronounced in English Bo) can be understood as fulfilling these purposes, but this article focuses on a series of cultural representations that addresses the problem of death as an undesirable and uncontrolled removal of a person from the community. According to Bloch and Parry (1982), because death as an uncontrolled event puts into question the extent to which the social order can govern the lives of its members, often mortuary rites reassert the eternal social order in some way,

[1] A useful survey of anthropological approaches to death rituals can be found in Huntington and Metcalf (1979); for a broader survey see Palgi and Abramovitch (1984). There is renewed consideration of the rite of passage analysis by Van Gennep (1909) and of the social implications of mortuary rites proposed by Robert Hertz (1907, 1960) on the "collective representation of death," drawn principally from examples in Indonesia. Huntington and Metcalf emphasize the importance of Hertz's work on the relationships among three basic pairs of elements (p. 66): the living and the mourners, the soul and the dead, the corpse and the burial and of his most original insight, the metaphoric parallel between the fate of the corpse and the fate of the soul, so vividly illustrated in customs related to second burial. These and other recent studies (Bloch and Parry 1982, Liberski 1986, Barley 1981) go on to combine the sociological and symbolic analysis of mortuary rites, exceeding the scope of this article. Philippe Ariès (1981) offers a historical review of attitudes toward death in European tradition. Specifically for the denial of death in non-African cultures, see Becker 1973 and in cross-cultural perspective, Rosenblatt et al 1976. I take this opportunity to thank the U.S. Fulbright Commission for making possible research in Canton Boo among the Wè-speaking people in 1985–6 and 1989–90. I am grateful to Dr. Christopher Steiner for helpful comments on this article.