

# 1

## Biometrics, Citizenship, and the Documentary State

Reflecting on the relationship between hegemony and critique, Ranajit Guha, one of the founding historians of *subaltern studies*, has highlighted the difficulty of constructing the critique of a given political and ideological order at a time when its categories still play a structuring role in the representation of it. It is only when this order is subverted, and the hegemony of its ideological representations begins to break down, that space for critique takes shape. Before this happens, historians would have to focus on partial, internal, contradictions in order to develop their critique (Guha 1997: 81 ff.).

Rethinking Guha's reflections on critique and hegemony led us to use the contradictions between the 'documentary state' and the 'biometric state' as a heuristic tool in our research on identification and citizenship in Côte d'Ivoire. On the one hand, the bureaucratic state whose work is based on writing and paper; on the other, the project of a state whose work would be grounded on biometric technologies. A project that today is presented by international governmental agencies with the hegemonic character of a modernizing instrument for the management of legal identity and thus for providing security and inclusion (Gelb and Clark 2013). Biometric identification is based on electronic and digital technologies enabling the scanning, the registration, and the verification of bodily features. Among these technologies, digital fingerprinting, iris or retina scanning, and facial and ear recognition are the most used. They all share the same goal of producing a 'unique identity' centred on an individual body and on the capacity of attesting its presence in different contexts, going from financial transactions to surveillance. Hence, they build a different kind of identity from the one constructed by civil registration. The latter is based not on bodily features, but on the social coordinates defining the person: name, time and place of birth, names of the parents, residence or marital status; not on digital scanners but on the testimony of civil servants and on writing. The (projected) rise of the biometric state and its conceptual opposition with the documentary state has given us the opportunity to develop our

analysis not only by focusing on contradictions between the two ideal types, but also by exploring the fissures that have opened up in the latter after the attack of biometric technologies in Côte d'Ivoire. Our approach, nonetheless, is not dialectical like the one of subalternist historians. It constructs its critique by means of ethnographic methodology and a genealogical approach; that is to say, by observing the contradictions that arise in social and political life and by highlighting the discontinuities that link and separate one *dispositif* (apparatus) of identification from the other, opposing their regimes of truth, visibility, and subjectivation (Deleuze 1989).

Looking at our work from another standpoint, our aim is to problematize the contradictions and struggles underway in the space of the African documentary state, its technologies, and its work of identification, in counterpoint to the current global, ideological hegemony of biometrics. This allows us to take some analytical distance to denaturalize the documentary state as a form that, according to Pierre Bourdieu, would otherwise be an almost 'unthinkable' object, since it would provide us with those very categories with which we think about society (Bourdieu 2012). In other words, it allows us to bring to light some specific logics and features of the documentary state and, as a consequence of utmost importance in our ethnographic frame, their appropriations and arrangements by Ivorian society. Writing and the materiality of papers have revealed themselves, as we shall see in the pages that follow, as vital instruments and parts of Ivorian 'arts of citizenship' (Diouf and Fredericks 2012).

### The Biometric Turn in African Societies

As with other countries in the Global South, Côte d'Ivoire has seen spectacular growth in biometrics since 2014. Biometric identification technologies are central to the infrastructure of the new capitalism and have become a huge economic issue and highly lucrative business worldwide. African societies are no exception to this global trend; indeed, in many respects they are ahead of the curve, experimenting with new systems for birth registration, banking certification, and voter registration based on the acquisition of bodily signs. Under the sway of the new private and public standard bearers of the digital economy, Africa has become a 'laboratory' for new identity registration technologies. This is nothing new: historians have shown that African and Asian colonies served for many years as testing grounds for techniques of population identification and control.

Today, one of the reasons for the biometricization of identities is to control the movement of people, which is subject to increasingly draconian surveillance regimes. This is driven chiefly by an obsession with terrorism and anti-migration policies. The 2015 migration crisis in Europe has drastically increased the demands that countries in the North place on those in the South to identify their nationals better. But biometrics has also been dressed up in the democratic trappings of access to rights, 'good governance', and development. Indeed, in 2015, providing legal identity for all became one of the 'Sustainable Development Goals' (goal 16.9) endorsed by the United Nations (UN) and all the international aid agencies.

The issue is particularly critical in Africa, where, in the early 2000s, overall civil registration coverage remained low. Since the second decade of this century, a wide range of initiatives have been deployed to improve civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems. Biometric technologies quickly came to be seen as the most viable tools for meeting the challenge of mass identification, based on the dual promise of their effectiveness and reliability—a promise in which, paradoxically, both border police and human-rights activists have put their faith.

The World Bank is one of the major players in Africa's 'biometric turn'. The central argument of the new 'Washington Consensus' is that the legal identification of individuals is a necessary condition for the continent's economic, social, and political development (Gelb and Clark 2013). The biometric revolution is presented as a technological opportunity to compensate for the endemic weaknesses of civil registration in Africa and achieve the holy grail of an identification system with universal coverage. The World Bank has made this target part of its 'Identification for Development' initiative (ID4D), which includes regional pilot programmes such as the 'West Africa Unique Identification for Regional Integration and Inclusion' (WURI) programme, launched initially in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire in June 2018. Regional initiatives have also emerged, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) effort to harmonize the issuance of biometric identity cards across the subregion in order to facilitate the movement of goods and people. The new consensus is promoted by an international coalition of public and private actors, particularly during the annual ID4Africa conferences, which bring together hundreds of representatives of African governments, international donors, and major firms in the sector. Marielle Debos, who has conducted research at these international forums, shows that, 'in conferences and trade fairs, it is much more than commercial transactions that are at stake: the players produce and disseminate expert knowledge and create a distinctive

“entre-soi” and symbolic competition’ that contribute to the construction of biometrics as ‘a matter of course for the continent’ (Debos 2023: 52, 60). The large global biometrics market is emerging as a ‘technological solution in a time of crisis’ (Debos 2023: 90).

One of the strongest critiques of this international network was published in 2022 by the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at New York University (CHRGJ 2022). It denounces the leadership of the World Bank and other international actors financing and promoting biometric identification in the Global South. Beyond any humanitarian rhetoric, this would be designed to provide each individual with a ‘transactional’ or ‘economic’ identity, whose ‘uniqueness’ would be dedicated above all to enabling secure financial transactions. Indeed, as the work of Keith Breckenridge (2010, 2011) has shown in Ghana and Nigeria, the biometrization of identities in these countries was primarily a tool to enable the financial system to capture the informal economy and ‘capitalise on the poor’.

Of course, the World Bank’s public discourse focuses on a whole other level, that of ‘humanitarian reason’ (Fassin 2010). The stakes are undoubtedly high. World Bank surveys have shown that a billion people around the world do not have identity documents and almost half of them are African. In 2018, 494 million people on the continent—50 per cent of the population—were supposedly ‘undocumented.’<sup>1</sup> Coverage rates vary greatly between countries, with, for example, birth registration rates and (adult) legal identity registration rates of 56 per cent and 28 per cent respectively in Angola, 77 per cent and 36 per cent in Burkina Faso, 61 per cent and 75 per cent in Cameroon, 63 per cent and 84 per cent in Kenya, 30 per cent and 6 per cent in Nigeria, and 16 per cent and 40 per cent in Chad (World Bank 2017). Côte d’Ivoire holds an intermediate position in the broad picture given by the World Bank, with 55 per cent of births registered and 45 per cent of adult citizens in possession of an ID card. In the following pages, we will see that, in fact, these rates are questionable and vary over time—including, notably, a peculiar decline in civil registration since 2015 that raises questions about the effectiveness of modernization reforms.

Although these figures, which are based primarily on data from the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), are disputed, they give an idea of what the World Bank calls the ‘identity gap.’ As part of its efforts to close this gap, the World Bank also performs analyses to evaluate national ‘identity ecosystems.’ These indicate that, while most African

<sup>1</sup> <http://id4d.worldbank.org/global-dataset/visualization> (accessed 20 March 2019).

countries have now adopted digital identification systems that incorporate biometric data, few of these systems are fully operational. Among the most ‘advanced’ countries in this ranking are Botswana, Kenya, Morocco, Namibia, and Rwanda—all states with a long history of identifying individuals. At the bottom of the list are the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, and the giant of West Africa, Nigeria, where, despite the introduction of biometric voter cards in 2015 and major projects to introduce biometrics in banking (Breckenridge 2011), the distribution of national ID cards is still very low (6 per cent according to the World Bank database). They remain, in practice, much less important than the ‘papers’ issued by local governments—particularly the ‘certificates of indigene’ required to access public jobs or enrol in university (Fourchard 2018).

In the great modernist narrative of legal identity and development, particular emphasis is placed on birth registration, which UNICEF sees as a ‘passport to protection’ (UNICEF 2013) and a condition for making ‘everyone visible in Africa’ (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa 2017). Having a legal identity is essential for accessing such fundamental rights as education, justice, voting, and property. Major programmes are being set up with the support of health and private-sector stakeholders—particularly mobile-phone companies—to help citizens access civil registration services, facilitate birth registration, and improve CRVS systems through the increased use of biometrics. In the Great Lakes region, in Kenya, and in a few countries such as Lesotho and São Tomé and Príncipe—which have integrated their civil registration and identification systems—these proactive CRVS policies are beginning to bear fruit. Yet on the whole, such systems have come up against major technical and administrative difficulties, as well as garnering little enthusiasm from those they intend to make more ‘visible’. Citizens have been quick to realize that the digitalization of identities could also constitute a powerful mechanism of selection and exclusion, and reinforce discriminatory practices already implemented by the documentary state. We shall see that in Côte d’Ivoire, these discriminatory logics persist despite the reforms to depoliticize and modernize civil registration.

This swathe of identification system reforms is clearly related to the evolution of international poverty reduction strategies, which increasingly rely on cash transfers (Jacquin 2018; Olivier de Sardan and Piccoli 2018). New development planning policies, supported at great expense by international agencies, have pinned their hopes of tackling poverty on a more streamlined and ‘reliable’ biometric basis for identifying who should receive aid and defining redistributive policies—which, in passing, questions the very principles of

the welfare state and the shift towards what we could call, after the work of James Ferguson (2012, 2015) on the transformation of the South African welfare systems, a 'post-social' state—that it, a state where services are delivered to individuals independently of their income and social category (Ferguson 2015). As a counterpoint to the logics of police surveillance, the global trend towards the biometricization of identities is presented as a crucial tool for states keen to take care of their needy populations. But biometrics can also be understood as the instrument of a new digital capitalism, less concerned with the civic inclusion of individuals and 'vulnerable groups' than with sorting them according to creditworthiness. Côte d'Ivoire under the Ouattara regime is a good example of how new identification technologies can be used to serve a hegemonic agenda that, notwithstanding its undeniable economic successes, exacerbates social inequalities.

The new liberal narratives of capitalist 'emergence' is clearly based on the supposed virtues of dematerializing data and identities, which are purported to reduce transaction costs, increase trust in business relations, limit corruption, and compensate for alleged state failures. This biometric utopia is particularly effective in the political arena, where it dangles the promise of a world free of electoral fraud and discrimination of all kinds. Electoral biometrics has become a huge and extremely lucrative international market. As Marielle Debos (2021c: 1) notes, it 'has continued to develop despite bitter failures and painful election aftermaths for opponents who had been promised technological miracles'. Since the first experiment in Lesotho in 2003, more than thirty other countries on the continent have adopted biometric technologies to make their electoral rolls more 'reliable' (via biometric voter registration (BVR) devices) and/or to verify the identity of voters on polling day and avoid multiple voting (via biometric voter verification (BVV) devices) (Debos 2023: 10, 73). While biometric voter identification is not widespread in the Global North, in Africa it has been presented as a panacea against fraud: biometric reconstitution of civil registers, biometric registration on electoral rolls, issuance of biometric voter cards and certificates, authentication of the vote using fingerprint or iris recognition,<sup>2</sup> and so on. The African market for these new electoral technologies is booming, provoking heated debate in some countries over their reliability and the loss of sovereignty that their use entails. Some publications have begun to question expectations about the digitization of elections, highlighting the biases involved and the perverse effects that

<sup>2</sup> As in Somaliland, for instance, one of the first countries to have used iris scanning to register voters. See Rader (2016).

they sometimes produce (Perrot, Pommerolle, and Willis 2016; Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis 2018; Debos 2018, 2021, 2023; ). Marielle Debos points out that biometrics is essentially a technopolitical performance of reliability; at best, it constitutes ‘a promise of democracy but not of revolution. Since it only concerns certain aspects of the electoral process, it is compatible with most of the tactics and frauds used to win an election’ (Debos 2023: 120). But these biases do not seem to be curbing the enthusiasm for electoral biometrics or the buoyancy of the identification technologies market in Africa.

In the case of Côte d’Ivoire, we shall see that identification and civil registrations reforms are closely linked to electoral issues. Long before the war, when the political field opened up to a multi-party system in the early 1990s, the question of ‘who is who’—who are the ‘real Ivorians’ entitled to vote and who are the ‘false nationals’ used as ‘election cattle’ by Houphouët-Boigny’s party—came to the fore. The introduction of new voter identification technologies did little to quell this long-standing controversy or prevent the resurgence of violence, as evidenced by the disputed 2010 elections that reignited the conflict until the fall of the Gbagbo regime in April 2011, and those in 2020, which resulted in more than a hundred casualties.

A multitude of national and international actors are using these new technologies to promote social inclusion through legal identification. Beyond the electoral and development issues involved, the stated objective is to provide each person with a unique, unfalsifiable biometric identifier, and to rationalize population registers—in particular by integrating civil registration and identification registers, which have historically been separated and managed by departments with different, even conflicting approaches: on the one hand, to define and guarantee rights; on the other, to discipline and punish. The biometric turn therefore goes hand in hand with major reforms to the state services responsible for registering individuals: in accordance with World Bank guidelines, current reforms tend towards the creation of autonomous identification agencies, self-financed and largely free of ministerial oversight. These include the National Identification Agency (NIDA) in Rwanda, the National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA) in Uganda, and the Office national de l’identification (ONI, or National Identification Office), in Côte d’Ivoire, which will be extensively discussed in this book. In Chapter 4, we will see that, in 2019, Côte d’Ivoire officially combined these two functions into a single agency, transforming the ONI into the new Office national de l’état civil et de l’identification (ONECI). This trend towards ‘agencifying’ and privatizing the state services concerned with legal identity is not insignificant. Behind the argument for administrative rationalization lies a

politico-biometric revolution that disrupts not only the institutional balance of the identification apparatuses but also the very principles of the authentication and veridiction of identities, which have hitherto been based on the logics of civil registration and the documentary state. This book comparatively explores the theoretical and practical implications of this rupture through the case of Côte d'Ivoire.

### **State, Citizenship, and Identification: An Analytical Framework**

New identification technologies seem to be bringing about a radical recasting of the relationship between individuals and the state that raises far-reaching questions about the evolution of citizenship in Africa and elsewhere. Biometrics appears to make a historical break with long-standing approaches to the identification of individuals: on the one hand, face-to-face identification based on oral testimony and family or social group memory, within the relatively limited space of acquaintanceship; on the other hand, remote documentary identification, which developed as mobility increased and relies on written documents. Although distinct, both these identification techniques are based on practices of attestation that require, at some stage, relations and forms of recognition, testimony, consent (to make statements, authenticate genealogies and biographies, interpret documents and signs, check for resemblance between an individual and their identity card, and so on), thus bringing subjectivities into play. Biometrics aims precisely to dispense with such social mediation, replacing the logic of attestation with that of the immediate and automated verification of identities inscribed on the body. It is based on the assumption that identities are perfectly transparent, that a 'truth' can be 'captured' from bodies and 'verified' using the appropriate software.

Beyond its surveillance functions, biometrics thus tends implicitly towards a desocialization of identities that seurocrats, humanitarians, and promoters of the new digital capitalism endorse. If we follow Breckenridge (2018), what is at stake in this transformation of the identity regime is the shift from the classificatory approach of documentary bureaucracy—connected to writing, and aiming to produce the knowledge necessary for governing the social—to a mathematical, numerical approach that disregards discourse and social categorization, simply identifying a body on the basis of distinguishing features that guarantee its uniqueness and codifying it in a numerical 'unique identifier'. Behind this technical evolution from the documentary state to the biometric state, Breckenridge (2014) argues, lies a genuine political and economic



revolution with major implications for citizens' relations with the state. To grasp what this means and problematize our Ivorian case study, we must briefly look back at the genealogy of the documentary state and its general working principles, which the spread of new technologies now seems to have overturned.<sup>3</sup>

The basis of any legal identity is the individual's inclusion in a register kept by a state institution (Caplan and Torpey 2001a; Higgs 2011; Breckenridge and Sretzer 2012). The registration of individuals is therefore historically linked to writing and paper (Groebner 2007; Noiriel 2007; Denis 2008; About, Brown, and Lonergan 2013). The works of Jack Goody (1977, 1986) and Tom Clanchy (1979) have shown in different domains how the formation of the state, bureaucracy, and writing were mutually dependent—writing having been the main tool with which the state represented and transformed the social world, defining statuses and individualizing rights and responsibilities that were previously managed by kinship groups or segmented into community and corporatist spheres. According to Scott (1998), at the heart of the classificatory logic of state registers lies the will of government to make each of these known, recognized subjects 'legible' and governable. Modifying individuals' names to turn them into 'legal identities proper to states' (Scott, Tehranian, and Mathias 2002) is one of the most striking manifestations of the centrality of writing in the state's manufacture of subject-citizens—particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where the administrative authorities' alphabetical transcription of first names and surnames has created endless difficulties in identification procedures, often forcing citizens to go to court to have their identity recognized (Barré 2018; Awenengo Dalberto 2020). In the chapters that follow, we shall see just how profoundly this act of putting the social identities—particularly surnames—on paper has marked Ivorian society in terms of its political polarization but also in its everyday functioning.

Name, filiation, place of birth, residence, marital status: this information is fundamental for the documentary state, which, by codifying it in its registers, transforms the facts of life into a set of social statuses that define the citizen's profile within an administrative and legal framework. The important thing in the process of civil registration is not to establish a direct connection between a body and the civil identity that has just been created, but to register a state-accredited status. And, when necessary, this connection relies on relational social practices such as testimony, statements, or attestations (from parents,

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed anthropological and conceptual perspective on the polarities between the documentary state and the biometric state, see Cutolo (2017).

health workers, or bureaucrats). In other words, the legal identities produced by the documentary state are socially embedded; they merely fix and isolate the reference points that define what we shall call the 'social person'—that is, an individual inserted in social spaces and networks that build and configure his or her identity in its plural dimensions (Brubaker 2001; Avanza and Laferté 2005). The process also involves the contractual dimension of writing, which engages a tacit agreement between the authorities and the governed about the signs upon which truth and falsehood—or, rather, the credible, the probable, the faked, and the improbable—are predicated. This contract is historically, socially, and spatially situated: in moments and places of identity conflict, the zone of trust becomes minimal, generating brutal, even deadly, systems of exclusion. This was the case during the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, in the fight against Boko Haram in North Cameroon, and in the war of 'who is who' in Côte d'Ivoire that we discuss in this book.

Putting social identities on paper—particularly surnames—has a bearing on the moral dimension within which the individual–citizen relates to the state. Echoing the work of Michel Foucault (1976, 2001) on the genealogy of modern subjectivity, and of Louis Dumont (1983) on individualism, many authors have shown that the history of identification apparatuses must be considered in relation not only to the evolution of notions of individuality and personhood, but also to the emergence, in global modernity, of a new 'public commitment to the moral and philosophical significance of the human self' (Caplan and Torpey 2001b). The sociologist Claudine Dardy (1998, 2004), in her ethnography of everyday life in France, has shown that the papers one keeps on one's person (driving licence, identity cards, passports, credit cards, transport cards, and so on) do not only regulate access to certain social services; they participate in constructing personhood, having significant implications for self-image and self-representation. Is this also the case in Côte d'Ivoire? Certain culturalist readings might suggest that African societies have remained impervious to an individualizing 'written reason' that is peculiar to Western modernity. This is not our opinion. In the following chapters, we shall see that the documentary state has penetrated deeply into Ivorian society and that papers are also important vehicles of moral and political subjectivation, including in social spaces that appear, at first glance, far removed from the upper reaches of government. In doing so, this book intends to debunk the common idea of an Africa removed from the logics of the bureaucratic polity and bureaucratic writing, echoing other scholarship that, following Goody (1977), has shattered such stereotypes (Fiquet and Mbodj-Pouye 2009; Bayart 2013).

Since the rise of biometric registration the ‘graphic reason’ of the documentary state is under attack from a ‘digital reason’ that disrupts the criteria for recognizing and verifying identities that were the hallmark of the documentary state. Whereas paper identities are embedded in language, biometrics silences—theoretically at least—any social authority in the identification process. When scanners analyse fingerprints or the structure of the iris, they have no use for the biographical information in the civil register; they simply generate a long, unique number, designating not a social identity but a body. Because it is unique, this identification number requires no further details to be effective—for example, to send migrants subject to the Dublin regulation back to the gates of Europe. The truth it produces is irrefutable precisely, because it is liberated from the truth games that construct social identity. In practice, the number is then associated with a legal name. But this occurs at a second stage, separately from biometric identification per se, in a sense hybridizing the logic of the system with elements from the social world and the documentary state. First and last names are extrinsic to the functioning of the machine, which simply uses signs detected on the body to confirm that it matches a certain number and not another. However, this operation in no way guarantees the veracity of the biographical data associated with the number: if someone shows up for biometric registration with a falsified birth certificate (known colloquially as a ‘René Caillié’ in Côte d’Ivoire<sup>4</sup>), the information on it could nonetheless be recorded in the database. By setting the ‘René Caillié’ in biometric stone, the technology confirms, and even consolidates, the ‘proper fakes’ that are produced on a daily basis by the *margouillats* and other intermediaries of the documentary state. We will return to the practices of ‘biometricization’ of fakes in Chapter 6, exploring the moral and political meanings of this economy of identity falsification.

For the time being, we shall simply highlight the tipping point that the biometric revolution brings with it: as a ‘delinguistic’ technology, to use Breckenridge’s expression (2018), biometrics is an instrument for the individualization, desocialization, and depoliticization of identities that drastically reduces individuals’ room for manoeuvre and ability to evade the state’s gaze. We must bear in mind that the genealogy of these systems relates to a history of surveillance that has much less to do with that of civil registration and citizenship than with the history of anthropometric policing techniques that began in the late nineteenth century with Alphonse Berthillon (Piazza 2005, 2011;

<sup>4</sup> In Côte d’Ivoire, the name of the famous French explorer refers to fake birth certificates and *jugements supplétifs* (delayed birth registration documents) that attempt to change the applicant’s age, making them administratively ‘born again’ (*re-né* in a notebook or *cahier*/Caillié). See Chapter 6.

Piazza and Crettiez 2006). It is a genealogy linked more closely to the bodily marks inflicted on criminals in the early modern period (Groebner 2001, 2007; Denis 2008) than to the connection between state, writing, and government. Historically, identification through the body first targeted those who found themselves in a marginal—even deviant—position in relation to ‘normal’ citizenship. Its desocializing and desubjectivizing character effectively forms part of the history of state repression. Unsurprisingly, it also has origins in colonial technologies of government (Ginzburg 1990; Sengoopta 2007; Medina-Doménech 2009; About 2011; Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2014). Breckenridge (2014) has shown, for instance, that the circulation of fingerprinting techniques between South Africa, India, and the UK played a central role in the formation of modern biometrics.

The intersecting genealogies of the biometric state and the documentary state raise major questions about citizenship at a time when, in Africa and elsewhere in the world, the trend is clearly towards integrating civil registries into huge digital databases—chiefly containing collections of ‘unique biometric numbers’. Each time a person’s fingerprints are scanned electronically, a separation is enacted between their social identity—which is expressed by a name or a life story—and a non-social, unrecounted identity captured by a scanner. This is an eloquent example of what Walter Benjamin called the production of ‘bare life’ as a product of police power—an expression that resonates all the more when considered in relation to the *corps habillés* (literally ‘clothed bodies’, the generic term for uniformed police and military corps in franco-phone Africa) that are most often tasked with ‘denuding’ others (Glasman and Debos 2012).

The philosopher Giorgio Agamben has reflected upon the moral implications of biometric technology as a tool for creating an identity that has nothing to do with recognition by the Other. Analysing the production of this non-relational identity, verifiable only by a machine, Agamben observes that, although the body and its distinguishing features belong ‘intimately and exclusively’ to the individual, biometric identity cannot be personally appropriated. Fingerprints, the structure of the iris, and even the face scanned by the machine are all ‘something with which I have absolutely nothing to do, something with which and by which I cannot in any way identify myself or take distance from: bare life, a purely biological datum’ (Agamben 2010: 50). For the philosopher, the eclipse of the person and the emergence of bare life are two complementary aspects of a modernity in which the state of exception gradually spreads to all areas of social life. It is hard to argue with his observation when one considers the development of surveillance technologies, from

the ‘bertillonage’ of the late nineteenth century to the current widespread use of facial recognition systems. Yet, upon closer analysis, the historical processes of the diffusion of biometrics follow not this somewhat teleological linearity, but rather much more contingent logics, linked to locally situated political and economic battles (Debos 2018; Bigo, Isin, and Ruppert 2019). As mentioned above, the accelerated biometricization of societies is also fuelled by explicitly humanitarian and civic purposes: on the one hand, to secure a legal identity for people ‘at risk of statelessness’ who, having no record in the civil registry, have no citizenship or rights; and, on the other hand, to promote a new distribution paradigm (Ferguson 2015), ‘liberated’ from the work of classification and categorization, which has had a defining role in the development and implementation of public policy since the early twentieth century (Shore, Wright, and Però 2011).

The debate between these two perspectives—surveillance or recognition—remains wide open. Agamben considered this social nudity as the product of an authoritarian, coercive negation of the modes of recognition and of the values building the moral person. Authors such as Ferguson, on the other side, seem to attribute to biometric identification some emancipatory potential; by fostering the individualization of a subject detached from biographical data, he or she can be emancipated from the social, community, and political affiliations that often weigh on individual freedoms. If we adopt Ferguson’s view (2015), this conception of identities may have major consequences for social, economic, and political relations in Africa. By establishing a direct relationship between the state and biometrically identified individuals, independently of any social ties, it would help to reduce the logics of patronage that lie at the heart of postcolonial state redistribution, thereby rebuilding the link between the state and the governed. But should we believe in this scenario of a liberal, biometric citizenship? Do digital identification technologies (and the public policy reforms they bring about) really alter the conditions for the exercise of statehood and citizenship, or are they merely a high-tech avatar of the liberticidal postcolonial order? We will see in this book that the Ivorian experience of the ‘ID war’ and of biometric modernization reforms offers differing answers to these questions.

### **The Byways of Ivorian Identification**

The fieldwork conducted for this book underscores the deep ambivalence of the post-conflict reconstruction process that aims to secure the state’s

(bio)control of identities. Indeed, this post-conflict neoliberal governmentality comes up against many forms of resistance that reveal other logics of identification and citizen subjectivation.

In the chapters that follow, we shall see, first of all, that the documentary state is not really giving way to the biometric state, and that the conceptual polarity between the two logics produces, in fact, once on the ground, a hybrid regime of identification. Ethnographic observation shows that, in the reality of registration offices in the big city of Abidjan, the small town of Bouaflé, and the villages of Anno, documentary and biometric registration techniques are enmeshed in a complex arrangement—overlapping, conflicting, and competing, but sometimes also complementing each other. This initial finding, though relatively unremarkable in itself, contradicts the promise that state modernization can be achieved simply by using new technologies. The Ivorian institutional identification system (the ‘identity ecosystem’ in World Bank parlance) has certainly undergone dramatic changes since the end of the war, with a stronger role for the ONI, the adoption of its biometric plan for a ‘National Register of Natural Persons’ (RNPP, or *Registre national des personnes physiques*), and a ‘National Identification Number’ (NNI, *Numéro National d’Identification*), giving each individual a ‘non-transferable, permanent’ identity that is compulsory for undertaking any formal step in social and political life (see Chapter 4). But in Côte d’Ivoire, as elsewhere, this centralizing plan is hampered by the reality of ‘day-to-day’ administration (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014b) and by the traditional rivalries between the various government departments competing to increase or defend their authority in the crucial area of registering individuals. We will highlight the recurrent tensions between the departments of the Ministry of the Interior, traditionally responsible for identification, and of the Ministry of Justice, responsible for civil registration, which are attempting to resist the more or less amicable takeover bids launched by the proponents of biometrics. ‘Paper is the foundation of everything!’ A senior civil registrar remarked during our research in January 2019. ‘If there’s any dispute with digital databases, it’s paper that prevails.’ Mischievously, he added: ‘We had an oral tradition; they gave us paper, and now we’re sticking with it!’ Joking aside, our research shows that, after a phase of all-out biometricization at the ONI, a *modus operandi* combining the biometric state and the documentary state is emerging, with the gradual establishment of the new RNPP, which uses both biometric and civil registration data. The new name of the ONECI—the National Office of *Civil Status and Identification*—itself attests to this process of hybridization, which, in a way, marks the revenge of the documentary state against the biometric state.

Our research brings to light a second paradoxical result of modernization reforms based on new technologies: the biometric state's potential to centralize the production of legal identities is countered by a fragmentation of public policies for registering individuals—owing notably to local initiatives and other 'pilot projects' promoted by particular donors in particular localities. In the identification sector, as in other areas, sub-Saharan governments' 'will to know' is more patchwork than panopticon. This fragmentary approach is accentuated by the powerful dynamics of privatization that have come to govern the world of identification, with states outsourcing the sovereign functions of registering and monitoring citizens to local or multinational firms. Côte d'Ivoire's post-conflict trajectory is symptomatic of this 'indirect private government' (Hibou 1999b; Mbembe 2000) of identities that raises major questions about national sovereignty and citizenship under twenty-first-century digital capitalism. The following chapters show that the indirect government of identities extends far beyond the official business of identification to pervade the entire social fabric. They highlight a tension between the tendency towards the ever-increasing technicization, centralization, and bureaucratization of 'papers', on the one hand, and, on the other, the privatization and informalization of these systems, which are implemented by a diverse range of private actors. A whole series of agents participates in identificatory policies, from the multinational companies issuing biometric visas to groups of young militiamen screening individuals at roadblocks, mobile phone companies offering birth registration services, international agencies such as the UNHCR, UN consultants registering demobilized ex-combatants, and the *margouillats* or intermediaries who hover around police stations to 'help' with the identification of 'floating populations'—for a fee.

The book's third major comparative result is that, despite the high hopes of advocates of biometric 'good governance', the modernization of identification systems does not do away with social intermediation and brokerage. Rather, it brings with it new informal practices that demonstrate social actors' indisputable ability to adapt to new technologies. Our argument is that the trend towards the privatization and informalization of ID policies is not a sign of the weakness or circumvention of states but a form of governmentality consistent with the *moyenne durée* of colonial and postcolonial states. It can even be seen as a continuation of the 'politics of the belly' (Bayart 1989), which has been significantly accentuated by new technology: the new identification markets offer considerable opportunities to jump on the biometrics gravy train, from official multimillion-dollar calls for tender to the lowliest registrar positions, and all the intermediaries of the biometric state and other ID-checking *mange-milles*

(corrupt policemen—‘eaters’ of 1,000 CFA bills) in between. While not central to our research, this predatory dimension is important: in both the Global North and the Global South, it is a significant factor in both leaders’ enthusiasm for new identification technologies and the growing frustration of citizens who bear the high costs of their biometric ‘enrolment’—in the form of a new head tax. Contrary to the distributive hypothesis of the ‘post-social’ state put forward by Ferguson (2015), the Ivorian experience of the biometricization of identities speaks more to the prebendal and inegalitarian logics of ‘Emergence’ than to logics of social inclusion. The new biometric ID card may well be vaunted as a sign of ‘citizen elegance’ by the ONI’s communications campaign featuring a young executive in a suit and tie<sup>5</sup>; it is out of financial reach for a large number of citizens who, until they can get their official card, are obliged to pay a high price for biometric certificates that require annual renewal. In Côte d’Ivoire as elsewhere, far from encouraging wider inclusion in social and political arenas, the adoption of biometric technology reinforces logics of exclusion already present in the documentary state. In the post-crisis context, of course, this exclusion is no longer effected under the *Ivoirité*-based auspices of political autochthony, but rather through the social inferiorization of a class violence ingrained in the Ouattara regime’s hegemonic project.

What emerges most clearly from our research is how deeply legal identification is socially embedded. Although biometric identification, as a technique, tends to erase the moral person, as Giorgio Agamben (2010) has observed, and even though it proposes an abstraction of identity the cuts it off from the realms of language and of social relations (Breckenridge 2018), this is in fact constantly challenged by the concrete practices of registering persons that we observed at public-service counters—as we shall see in the following chapters (see Chapters 5, 6, and 7). The social embeddedness of identification practices is further underscored by the profusion of logics of self-census and self-registration, which often reproduce the signs and aesthetics of biometric modernity: professional cards, party or trade-union membership cards; traditional chief’s cards, village association or local residents’ cards; *petits papiers* or informal property documents; cards for cultural associations, religious fraternities, and traditional practitioners; membership cards for a tea grin, neighbourhood association, or sports club; cards for the Association of Homeless Patriots in a slum in Abidjan; militia ID cards and demobilized ex-combatant cards, and so on. During our fieldwork, we came across a profusion of identity

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.oneci.ci/qui-sommes-nous> <http://www.oni.ci/presentation> (accessed 30 September 2019 and 2 December 2021).



documents produced by the social actors themselves, including within the social spheres ostensibly most resistant to legal–rational bureaucratic logic. For example, the Dozos—neo-traditional hunters turned rebel-militiamen—had undertaken an internal process of ‘biometric’ registration (in fact imitating biometrics) of their members in order to gain state recognition after the war (Chapter 7). Another eloquent example from the post-war period in Côte d’Ivoire are the ‘demo’ (for ‘demobilized ex-combatant’) cards, which identify the holder as a moral—and consequently pecuniary—creditor to the nation for which they had fought. As Kamina Diallo (2017) has shown, this ‘demo’ card associated with a particular registration number—attesting to early enlistment in the armed struggle—has become the common denominator of a collective mobilization, that of the ex-combatants of the ‘Cellule 39’, whose violent actions are now combined with a ‘purely administrative struggle’ for public recognition. In Chapter 7, we look at a similar logic of political and administrative struggle surrounding the cards of ‘toxic waste victims’ identified by ‘Odile la Présidente’ in her *maquis* in the Cité Rouge in Cocody. The holders of these cards hope to obtain assistance and compensation through the lawsuit against the shipping company responsible for the Probo Koala ecological disaster that poisoned hundreds of people in Abidjan in 2006.

In a biometric context in which legal identities are dematerialized, these material signs of identification ‘from below’ are all the more significant. At the very least, they indicate that individuals do not simply submit to the identificatory pressure that has been imposed on them exogenously by the state, from colonial registration to the contemporary era of global biometrics. Through their self-census practices, they fully engage with the classificatory logic of the ‘bureaucratic city’ (Bayart 2013) and in so doing appropriate the instruments of their own recognition. These practices can be read—to paraphrase Mbembe (2001)—as ‘bureaucratic writings of the self’ (Awenengo Dalberto and Banégas 2018): writings of the self through ‘papers’ that underline the strength of the documentary state imagination and the appetite for civic inclusion associated with it. We think that these grassroots practices of self-registration do not only attest to membership of a given sociability group but are also an aid in demands for rights and a vehicle of self-affirmation—both individual and collective—that gives social depth to citizenship.

Referring to social depth is crucial for our thinking on the future of the citizenship issue in the age of new identification technologies. It counters the idea, still found in humanitarian and international agency circles, that presents the apparent lack of interest in registration as the legacy of a premodern or ‘traditional’ past. On the other hand, we want to go beyond the legacy of the

colonial 'bifurcated state' (Mamdani 1996) and the exclusion of indigenous subjects from civil registration as an exhaustive account of present-day practices. This historical legacy is clearly responsible for the formation of a widely shared utilitarian habitus regarding registration and ID documents (Cooper 2012; see also Chapters 5 and 6). Nonetheless, it should not be transformed into a sort of essential, 'cultural' attitude. Indeed, the people who do not declare newborns to the civil registry are the same people who are quick to adopt the new bureaucratic and administrative opportunities of identification, showing remarkable competence of rules when they have to deal with, or circumvent, or arrange them. We have described this in the case of the brokers of the paper bureaucracy, the *margouillats*, and in the ethnography of the 'lineage' management of identity papers in an Akan society, where legal identities (and the cards representing them) can be redistributed, under the supervision of heads of families, from one sibling or cousin to another (see Chapter 6).

How, then, should we account for these apparent contradictions? Studying the social life of papers using an ethnographic approach, together with providing historical genealogies of practices, allows us to reframe registration with the different historical configurations of the relationship between citizenship and the state. It is then possible to describe these 'deviant' uses of papers as a form of 'revenge for African societies' (Bayart 1989). Frederick Cooper (2012, 2014) had already suggested such a 'revenge' (without using the word) by showing how Africans, in the late-colonial period, used civil registration to assert their own objectives, bending it as far as possible to their needs, and blending it with local notions and values of personhood. At the same time, he has highlighted some important differences that opposed coeval colonial and metropolitan government (Cooper 2002): unlike what had happened in Europe, where the arts of government have gradually been developed in connection with the 'will to know' about the population, the colonial state had little interest in its subjects. It was rather a 'gatekeeper state' (Cooper 2002: 5), whose leaders were concerned chiefly with controlling the profits generated by economic extraversion, and very little with understanding local social dynamics and tracking individuals (see also Cooper 1996: 335).

Even though the differences opposing metropolitan and colonial governmentality have to be considered, if we take a closer look at the Ivorian case (and doubtless at the colonial history of the *Afrique-Occidentale française* (AOF, or French West Africa)), it is nonetheless hard to say that its authorities lacked any 'will to know'. As we will see in Chapter 2, the colonial state was in many ways an 'ethnographer state' (Chauveau and Dozon 1985, 1987), which set out to identify populations in order better to control them and to

put them to work. Maurice Delafosse, an administrator, ethnographer, and linguist (Amselle and Sibeud 1999), played a crucial role in this process. His *Vocabulaires comparatifs de plus de 60 langues ou dialectes parlés à la Côte d'Ivoire* (Delafosse 1904) provided the 'scientific' basis for a certain representation of Côte d'Ivoire as the 'country of sixty ethnic groups'. This undeniably influenced the formation of ethno-regional identities and contributed, under the Houphouëtiste regime, to the affirmation of a 'Baule ethnocracy' (Memel-Fotê 1999), which later mutated into an ethno-nationalist ideology: *Ivoirité*. Several other authors were involved in building this archive of knowledge on Ivorian 'races' and 'ethnicities'. Thus, starting in the 1930s, appeared a 'will to know' that was useful for colonial governmentality and the differential *mise en valeur* (development and 'improvement') of Ivorian territories (Chauveau and Dozon 1985)—knowledge that defined and classified social groups within a governmental framework where communities (ethnic, religious, linguistic, and so on) were the subjects produced and recognized by the administration (Conklin 1997). By obliterating the historical and political dimensions of the dominated societies, this ethnographic archive produced a taxonomic and hierarchical classification that, as we shall see, deeply permeated the imaginaries of nation and citizenship. In our research, we identified traces of this logic in a paternalistic authoritarianism, imposing the mediation of community belonging to relationship of the citizen with the state—hence, imposing relations of personal dependence and moral debt that this entailed.

For a long time, moreover, as we have reconstructed in Chapter 2, citizenship was closely correlated with the patronage networks of the former single party, the Parti démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire-Rassemblement démocratique africain (PDCI-RDA, or Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire-African Democratic Assembly). Until 1990, the most important 'identity document' was the PDCI membership card. Required and verified both in the street and in dealings with public services, it proved that the holder was a good political citizen. Along with this card, citizens might carry the card of a village association, a religious brotherhood, a neighbourhood chieftaincy, or an ethnic association in Abidjan, but also a Burkina Faso or Malian consular card. As signs of community belonging, these cards implicitly attested to the subject's position in the social space and his or her relationship to the state more generally. In a context structured by a rationality of recognition rather than a logic of identification, subjection to the single party and membership in a community were the *x* and *y* axis of the citizen–subject. We will see in the following chapters that in the age of biometric reforms, the logic of recognition continues to mark the practices and imaginaries of citizenship; it is found, for instance, in the practices

of self-registration attesting to the link between a particular individual and a group, be it partisan, ethnic, or religious.

In post-war Côte d'Ivoire, where President Ouattara himself called at one stage for an 'ethnic catch-up', communitarianism is not just a thing of the past. The ethno-nationalist ideology of *Ivoirité* may have been expunged from the political vocabulary, but it has not disappeared from the imagination of citizenship, which, for many Ivoirians, continue to be correlated with belonging to one of the 'autochthonous ethnic groups' of Côte d'Ivoire listed by the Ivorian anthropologist Georges Niangoran-Bouah (Cutolo 2010) or even to a 'village of origin' (Marshall-Fratani 2006; Banégas 2006a)—that is, to the homeland of one of these 'autochthonous ethnic groups'. On this basis, it is not hard to understand the practices of 'ID redistribution' in certain village communities. The legal identity of a young person can be attributed without much concern to one of his or her siblings or cousins if it proves necessary for relations with the state (for schooling, for example), because those involved do not consider such a transgression as jeopardizing the fundamental principles of the post-colonial community-based pact that still governs social and political identities (see Chapter 6).

Is this implicit but socially shared morality of citizenship, in which personal identity, collective belonging, and the 'logics of the debt' establishing dependence from the community (Marie 2002) are closely linked, now being bulldozed by the individualizing and desocializing power of biometrics? Our research seems to highlight, instead, the resilience of the autochthonous paradigm. 'We all know each other, among ourselves'—so they say in Côte d'Ivoire to refer to all those who are an integral part of this (ethno-)communal conception of national belonging—and, on the flip side, to discriminate against those who are not. This metaphorical extension of the principle of local acquaintance to the national level is crucial for grasping how the regimes of identity veridiction hang together, and the strength of the stereotypes that, despite new technologies, continue to structure conceptions of citizenship. To understand this resilience, we need to delve into history. We invite the reader to do so in the two chapters that follow.