Massive migrations from the Central region of the Ivory Coast to the Southwest of the country may mean that the tolerance threshold has been reached between tribes competing for scarce agricultural land, indicates a just-published report prepared by researchers at the Institute of Tropical Geography at the Ivory Coast National University.

The exhaustive study of the country's dramatic population shifts and their possible socioeconomic and political consequences was undertaken with support from Canada's International Development Research Centre.

Scarcely a trickle in the 1950s, internal migrations accelerated when the West African nation gained independence in 1960. Since 1970, these population movements have increased at an alarming rate.

The focus of attention is on the Baule, one of the most migratory peoples in the Ivory Coast. Many lived in the new Koussou Dam zone, and were among the 75,000 people forced to leave their villages as a result of its construction. The flooding of arable land and uncertain climatic conditions that militated against stable harvests also made their resettlement necessary. As a result, about one-third of the approximately 1.5 million Baule are now in a state of permanent emigration, living in areas of the Ivory Coast other than their traditional homelands.

**Propensity for Emigration**

The Baule people are a significant part of the population of the Ivory Coast.
Coast, and they have a very high birth rate. Social and historical conditions have made them particularly skilled in agroforestry, but about two-thirds of their land lie outside the zone where cash crop farming is profitable.

Those involved in the resulting agricultural migrations are almost exclusively between 20 and 45 years of age; they are the ones most capable of establishing plantations. Under the age of 25, a man is generally considered too young to assume such responsibilities; over 45, he is too old.

**Female Migrations**

While men account for 53 percent of the migrating population, women make up the remaining 47 percent. The situation is peculiar to the Baule whose relatively flexible family structure allows adolescent girls to embark on migratory adventures with their parents' blessing.

The city is a refuge in which the woman can escape traditional restrictions and acquire a new social status based on money. A woman in the village can seldom subsist or gain prestige without the support of a man. Only in the city can she fully acquire such prestige.

The exodus is growing among young women between 15 and 19 years of age. They go to Abidjan, Bouaké or Yamoussokro where they can work as housemaids or engage in clandestine prostitution and earn a substantial amount of money.

The girls often return to their village wearing beautiful loincloths and steeped in "the ways of the city", easily impressing their mothers who encourage daughters still at home to try their luck in the city. Thus, the stout Baule woman, divorced or single, who is the owner of a restaurant-bar, or is a businesswoman supporting a number of dependants, is a familiar sight in Ivory Coast cities.

**Baule Society**

The Ivory Coast's accession to independence resulted in many changes in the country's traditional social structures. However, the Baule still live largely according to ancestral customs.
Traditionally, a person's prestige used to depend on his family's social status and each person was judged according to the services he rendered to his community.

With the development of a market economy, the old social hierarchy based on traditional values was replaced by a new one based on money. The traditional control mechanisms applied by the community to its members are thus becoming increasingly ineffective. Individual success comes first.

However, one cannot over-emphasize the significance of the rural Baule's traditional subordination to the mystical and to the sacred. These factors impact significantly on his initiatives and behaviour, forbidding some projects and permitting others. Far from considering drought as inevitable and a poor harvest as the result of human error, for instance, the rural inhabitant perceives them as punishment inflicted by the heavens for the sins of the group or of one of its members.

Dangerous Strangers

There has thus far been no record of unions between Baule planters and women from the new regions into which they have moved. The fact is a significant reminder of the communities' inability to intermingle and breach their differences. Cultural relationships, with their well-known positive effects, are discouraged by linguistic barriers. Few, if any, Baule planters speak Bete or Bakwe, major dialects in the Southwest region.

For the locals, the immigrants are foreigners who have brought dangerous fetishes which can destroy harvests. Stories of witchcraft attributed to immigrants cast a pall over the social climate in the host regions. Complications in intercommunity relationships are thus also cultural in nature.

For the immigrants, the problem lies in adhering to as strictly as possible, and even legitimizing, the agreements reached with landowners. The quest for a legal land strategy appears simpler than it really is. Ivory Coast law holds that land belongs to the person who cultivates it. According to the
legislator, the provision encourages economic development since it is likely to break down the ethno-cultural barriers to progress.

This rule, of course, flies in the face of the unwritten law that land belongs to the ethnic communities occupying it. Custom dictates that land is inseparable from culture, religion and in particular, historic rights. In this framework, it is impossible for individuals outside the ancient culturally based ownership patterns to truly own a parcel of land.

It would be difficult to expect the Baule, so steeped in their own customs, to use the legal ammunition of today. Yet, Baule immigrants often turn to modern laws when their hosts fail to respect their agreements. Such cases clog the courts in Soubre, Sassandra, Gagnoa and Daloa.

The local inhabitants have devised their own strategy for stemming the Baule tide. One element of the strategy is the strengthening of religious rules governing property administration. And religious sanctions can be particularly effective in a milieu so tied to ancestral traditions.

A Patient Process

It would appear that migrations from the Central region to the sparsely populated Southwest offers a solution to the problem of forest development. But the situation is in fact quite different. In many areas, the tolerance threshold has been reached and local people who have been passive for many years are beginning to develop openly negative reactions to immigrants.

These factors indicate that there is a need to manage a process whose scope has gone beyond the responsibility of the individuals involved. The problem is far from simple, however, for poorly-gauged government intervention may lead to a political polarization of situations to which there is already too great a tendency to attribute tribal overtones. One of the most pressing tasks with regard to current handling of the migratory process is the bringing together of political and administrative leaders from regions that the Baule are leaving and those in which they are arriving. In this way, both individual and government
interests could be protected.

The issue of land ownership is not the only raised by increased migrations. Protected forests, considered by many tribal chiefs as being under their jurisdiction, are continually being encroached upon. The situation is worsening because of increased demand for arable land, which is itself aggravated by the heavier migratory flow.

In this regard, the population migrations occurring in the Central region of the Ivory Coast certainly afford valuable lessons for other countries in Africa and in other continents faced with a similar situation.

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