

# STRANGERS IN THEIR OWN LAND

## MIGRATION WITHIN IVORY COAST

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Scarcely a trickle in the 1950s, internal migrations in the Ivory Coast accelerated when the West African nation gained independence in 1960. Since 1970, these population movements have increased at an alarming rate. Massive migrations from the Central region to the Southwest of the country are causing conflict between tribes competing for scarce agricultural land.

The Institute of Tropical Geography (at Ivory Coast National University) has just published a report indicating that the days of easy expansion of land holding may have come to an end. The report sums up the findings of an exhaustive study, undertaken with IDRC support, of the country's dramatic population shifts and their possible socio-economic and political consequences.

The focus of attention is on the Baule, one of the most migratory peoples in the Ivory Coast. Many lived in the areas where the Koussou Dam was built. When their land was flooded, the government helped 75 000 people move to designated resettlement areas close to the large forests of the less populated Southwest. In recent years, inclement weather has caused a series of poor harvests on the remaining arable Baule homeland. As a result, one-third of the approximately 1.5 million Baule have now permanently left their traditional homeland and are living in other areas of the Ivory Coast.

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### PROPENSITY FOR EMIGRATION

The Baule people make up nearly 20 percent of the population of the Ivory 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 remaining land lies outside the zone where cash crop farming is profitable.

Those involved in the 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 20, a man is generally considered

too young to assume such responsibilities; over 45, he is too old.

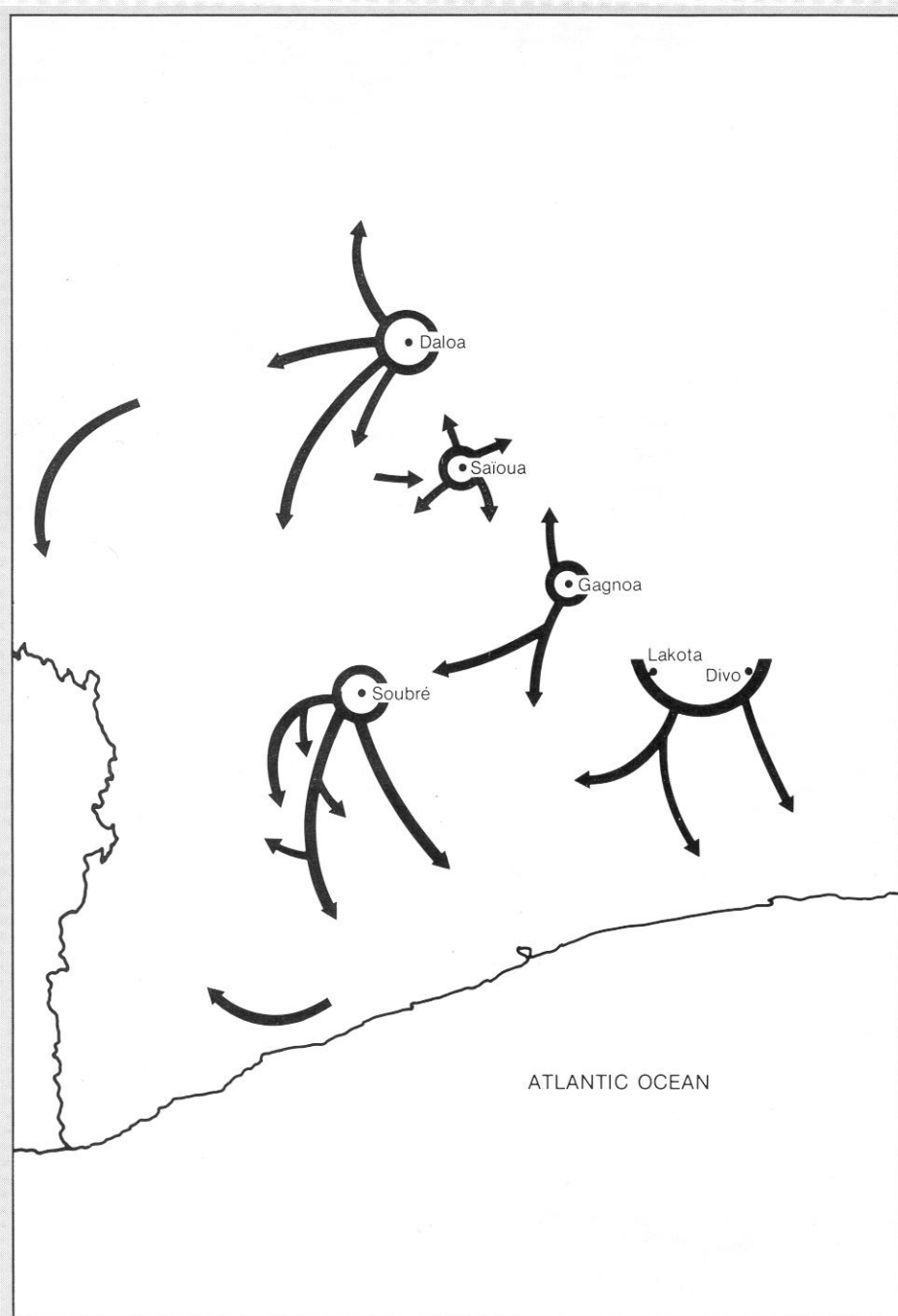
### FEMALE MIGRATIONS

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, much less gain prestige without the support of a man. Only in the city can she make it on her own.

The exodus is growing among young women between 15 and 19 years of age. They go to Abidjan, Bouaké or Yamoussoukro 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.



IVORY COAST — Migration patterns of the Baule people.

## 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 depended on the family's social status and each person was judged according to the services he or she rendered to the 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 on 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 have significant impact on their initiatives and behaviour,

forbidding some activities and permitting others. Far from considering drought as inevitable and a poor harvest as the result of human error, for instance, the rural inhabitants perceive them as punishment inflicted by the heavens for the sins of the group or of one of its members.

## DANGEROUS STRANGERS

There have thus far been no recorded unions between Baule farmers and women from the new regions into which they have moved. This is indicative of the communities' inability to intermingle and overcome their differences. Cross-cultural relationships, with their well-known positive effects, are discouraged by language barriers as few, if any, Baule planters speak Bete or Bakwe, the major dialects of the Southwest.

For the locals, the immigrants are foreigners who have brought dangerous fetishes which can destroy harvests. Reports of witchcraft attributed to the newcomers cast a pall over the social climate in the host regions.

For the immigrants, the problem lies in legitimizing their claim to land in the Southwest. Ivory Coast law holds that land belongs to the person who cultivates it. According to the legislators, this encourages economic development since it is likely to break down the ethno-cultural barriers to progress. The quest for legal land ownership appears simpler than it really is.

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

It seems unlikely that the Baule, so steeped in their own customs, would 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 discouraging Baule settlers. One mechanism is the strengthening of old religious rules governing property administration. And religious sanctions can be particularly effective in a milieu so tied to ancestral traditions.

The issue of ownership of farmland is not the only one raised by increased migration. Protected forests, considered by many tribal chiefs as being under their jurisdiction, are continually being encroached upon. As the tide of migrants puts pressure on the cleared arable land, the newcomers move into the forests, clearing and cultivating new farmsteads.

## A PATIENT PROCESS

It was thought that migrations from the Central region to the sparsely populated Southwest would offer a solution to the problem of developing that region's forests. 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 be openly negative 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 is to bring together the 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.

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. □

*This article was written from a study by D. Hauhouot Asseypo, Assa Koby and Atta Koffi, De la savane à la forêt : Étude des migrations des populations de Centre-Bandama. Mémoires et documents de l'Institut de géographie tropicale. Université nationale de Côte d'Ivoire*