

THE CONCEPT OF "IVOIRITÉ": AN IDENTITY BASED CONCEPT AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIO-POLITICAL LIFE IN IVORY COAST¹

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Abstract: This paper will first discuss the origin of the concept of "Ivoirité," an identity-based concept conceived of and promoted by the intellectual world in the Ivory Coast. The paper will also analyze the impact of the concept of Ivoirité on the Ivorian socio-political life and the challenges of building a nation composed of different ethnicities and religious groups. The author concludes with recommendations that may help strengthen national identity in the Ivory Coast.

Key Words: National identity, Civil war, Ivoirité, reconciliation.

Résumé: Cet article de journal expliquera d'abord l'origine du concept d'"Ivoirité," un concept basé sur l'identité conçu et promu par le monde intellectuel en Côte d'Ivoire. Ensuite, L'auteur analysera l'impact du concept d'Ivoirité sur la vie socio-politique ivoirienne et les défis de la construction d'une nation composée de différentes ethnies et groupes religieux. L'auteur conclura avec des recommandations qui pourraient aider à renforcer l'identité nationale de la Côte d'Ivoire.

Mots clés : Identité nationale, Guerre civile, Ivoirité, réconciliation.

Introduction

During the 19th century, Europeans imposed national borders on an area that encompassed a collection of various ethnic groups. France controlled Ivory Coast as a colony, but during the 1940s and the 1950s the native people fought for independence under the guidance of a strong and charismatic leader named Felix Houphouët-Boigny, who became their first president. Upon achieving independence in 1960, Ivory Coast initially prospered economically and enjoyed political stability, but in recent years the country has been confronted with economic problems, ethnic conflict and civil war (Obi 2007, p.10). On September 19th, 2002 civil war broke out in Ivory Coast. The conflict split the country in half

¹ Le concept d'ivoirité: un concept basé sur l'identité et son impact sur la vie socio-politique en côte d'ivoire

corresponding to the religious, ethnic and political lines between the people of Ivory Coast. More specifically, the country's national identity has been fractured and the impact has been mostly negative for its people. Until today, the country is still struggling to find peace and stability. The concept of Ivoirité raises the difficult question of nationalism and citizenship in a post-colonial state composed of many ethnic and religious identities. The evolution of this concept from its inception to its use as a political tool has contributed to fracturing the social fabric of the Ivory Coast.

0.1 Theoretical Framework

The process of nation-building is complex, especially when the nation is ethnically and religiously heterogeneous. In the process of building a sovereign nation, nation building strategies aim to weaken or completely eradicate the pre-existing ethnic, linguistic or religious identities that contradict national identity (Craig 1999). Benedict Anderson, a political scientist and historian, used the term "imagined community" or a socially constructed nation. He stressed that nations such as China, Germany, France and Italy had strong identities before becoming modern states (Anderson 1983). He suggested that education, policies, infrastructure for economic growth and especially media can play a major role in nation building. Moreover, besides the challenges of ethnic and religious diversity, most postcolonial states in Africa are still struggling with the colonial power exploitation of economic resources. The argument in this paper supports the idea of building a nation that fosters national identity while respecting the uniqueness of each ethnic and religious group in the Ivory Coast. The author will first base his argument and analysis on his doctoral research survey conducted in 2013-2016. Second, the root causes of the concepts of Ivoirité and its political implications will be thoroughly discussed. Before concluding the paper, the author will make recommendations to effectively address the issue of national identity and the concept of Ivoirité in the Ivory Coast.

0.2 Research methodology and implementation

From 2013 to 2016, the author conducted doctoral research in New York, USA. This was a case study that involved 21 leaders of the Ivorian community in New York. The research method included practicing "active listening" to gather data regarding this issue. One of the factor research questions was to describe the root cause of the Ivorian conflict. The research was carried out in three main parts. The first phase was the gathering of information about each community leader, including: name, contact information, organization, main responsibilities in their community, the time he/she has been serving as the community leader, how long they have been a New York resident, age, gender, level of education completed, marital status, faith, ethnic background, political affiliation, if any, and finally

immigration status, which was optional. All this information allowed the author to know the community leaders better.

The second phase consisted of gaining an understanding of the nature of each community. Data was collected regarding the vision and mission statement of the organizations, the number of male and female members of each community, and the ethnic, political and religious diversity of each community. For these two phases, the data was gathered through surveys sent by email and personal contact. The third phase consisted of collecting information about the leaders' perspectives on the root cause(s) of the Ivorian conflict and its impact on the diaspora of New York. The different answers from these leaders were collected and analyzed according to their ethnic, religious, and political background. This data was gathered through direct meetings with the community leaders, including face-to-face communication, with some sessions being recorded and transcribed later to save the essence of the information. The practice of active listening was exercised during this phase. The author wrote down a reflection as a record while gathering all information. The reflection was incorporated into a document called the listening guide. It gave a summary of the conversation and of the challenges encountered during the listening experience. The listening guide helped measure the efficiency of active listening. This process supports the author research in understanding the population he was investigating.

0.3 Research Population

Ivory Coast is composed of many tribal and ethnic groups. Each group has maintained a strong allegiance to their traditions and religious beliefs. This gives Ivory Coast a dynamic and diverse culture but has been the cause of tension and conflict. Members of more than 60 different ethnic groups live in Ivory Coast, speaking dozens of different languages or dialects, and having their own unique traditions, cultures, and legends. Like most African nations, Ivory Coast's boundaries were drawn by Europeans. As a result, virtually every ethnic group in Ivory Coast has members who live in neighboring countries. It is not unusual for an Ivorian to have more in common culturally and linguistically with a resident of neighboring countries such as Guinea, Ghana, Burkina Faso or Mali than he does with other Ivorians (Habeb 2005, pp.47-48). Ivory Coast has four main ethnic groups, the Akan, the Krou, the Voltaic and the Mandé which can be subdivided into dozens of smaller groups. The community structure in New York is identical to the one in the Ivory Coast. Ivorians in New York are organized based on ethnic, religious and even political affiliations, as they are back home.

There are about 12,000 Ivorian immigrants living in the New York City area. The largest populations are in Harlem and the Bronx. Due to the diversity of the

Ivorian population, one can count about 32 different groups and associations. These are categorized by ethnic, political, and religious affiliation. The purpose of the project was to focus on leaders who have experienced either existing conflict or unresolved conflict for many years. The leaders are also dealing with their community members among whom many are direct victims of the Ivorian conflict.

Included in the study were more than 21 leaders, and their organizations are classified into three groups: religious, cultural/NGO, and political. Leaders of religious organizations include: the senior pastor of The Power of God Manifestation Church in Queens; the pastor of Rehoboth Church in the Bronx; the Imam of Masjid Al-Aqsa mosque in Harlem; the senior pastor of Work and Mission Baptist Church in Harlem; and the pastor of the King of Kings Ministries in the Bronx. The challenges among these leaders are rooted in their religious and cultural differences. Leaders of cultural groups and NGOs include: the president of the Union of Ivorians in New York; the president of the ethnic association group "WÊ" of New York; the president of the Association of Northern Ivorians; the president of the ethnic association "Baoulé-Agni" of New York; the president of the Association of Marcoré (a non-profit); the chief of the ethnic group "Beté" of New York; and the president of the ethnic group Ivorian Women of New York. The biggest challenge among these leaders is primarily related to cultural differences. Leaders of political organizations include the secretary general of the Democratic Party of Ivory Coast in New York; the representative of the Ivorian Popular Front of New York/New Jersey; and the representative of the Rally of the Republican Party of New York. The challenge facing these leaders is connected to the issue of national identity and governance and succession of leadership. Analysis of the data information sheds light on this matter. In fact, all these factors are interrelated, and to effectively address the issue of conflict none of them should be ignored.

1. Research results and analysis

Twenty-one leaders' perspectives on the issue of Ivoirité helped gather substantial data through a survey conducted by the author. Leaders of the Ivorian diaspora from diverse cultural, political, and religious background were able to share their perspectives and active listening was used as the methodology. The results of the research suggested that the root cause of the Ivorian conflict is primarily a national identity issue. As far as the conflict is concerned, eight leaders or 38.09% believe that the root causes of the conflict are issues of national identity and citizenship, while five or 23.80% believe the cause to be issues of leadership and succession. These two results are directly related because the main factor that contributed to the fall of President Bedié was the interpretation of the issue of Ivoirité in politics. These two results when combined are 13 leaders or 61.89% related

to the issue of Ivoirité. Ivory Coast is still a nation in search of its national identity, the nation must adapt to democratic values after many decades of a single party system under the first president Felix Houphouet-Boigny. In Ivory Coast, ethnicity, religion and politics are interconnected and can influence most peoples' political choice.



Source: Doctoral Research Survey 2014-2016, New York City.

There are four leaders or 19.04% who believe that ex-colonial power is the root cause of the conflict. Many Ivorian leaders believe the country has not yet achieved its political and economic independence from France, the former colonial power. Three leaders or 14.28% believe that the Ivorian conflict is related to poverty and economic reasons, and one leader or 4.76% believes that the problem is primarily spiritual. These different viewpoints are matched to the political, ethnic, and religious landscape of the Ivory Coast. In fact, leaders who are Christian, politically close to the former president Gbagbo, and socialist in general tend to view the root of the conflict as the former colonial power. They believe the colonial power has control over the resources and they must fight to regain true independence. However, leaders from the Muslim majority in the northern Ivory Coast, who are politically close to the current president Ouattara, tend to perceive the root of the Ivorian conflict as the issue of nationality and exclusion. Many northerners considered themselves victims of the concept of Ivoirité. Those who perceived it as an issue of leadership and succession are mostly aligned with the former president Henry Konan Bedié, who was a victim of the military coup in 1999. The constitution was violated, and violence was used to remove president Bedié. Those who believe the root cause was poverty blamed the former colonizer France, but also poor leadership in developing the country. These leaders considered mismanagement

and corruption as key factors that contribute to poverty. Only one leader believed it was spiritual and strongly believed Ivory Coast has turned away from Jesus Christ. The country must profess Jesus Christ as the only savior to usher in a new era of peace and development. Each of these points are somewhat valid, but this paper will focus on addressing the issue of Ivoirité from its inception to its application in politics including the negative impact on the Ivorian society.

2. Discussion

2.1. *The origin of Ivoirité*

The question of identity that has a grip on the neck of African existence could be traced directly to the era of colonialism. The colonial masters gave the African the notion of inferiority. African scholars support the view that Africans were forced to believe that they have no religion, no culture, and no history or rationality. The postcolonial African nationalists, scholars, writers and philosophers attempted to defend African culture. They engaged themselves in the mental decolonization of African people. Two questions were involved in this battle, first the question of how best to respond to the colonial denigration or underestimation of African culture and tradition, and secondly the question, which is still very relevant, of how best to achieve development in Africa without compromising African identity. In the 1960s most African scholars who fought for their country's independence felt a responsibility to return home and participate in the development of their country (Olusegun 1995, pp.26-38). In Ivory Coast some of these scholars played an important role regarding the revival of Ivory Coast cultural identity. Georges Niangora Bouah, professor of anthropology in the National University of Ivory Coast, was the founder of the concept of drumology (science of the interpretation of the drum). This was an appeal to valorize the way African people communicated through the drum before the colonial period. Bernard Zadi Zaourou, professor of African literature, Memel Fotê, professor of Ethno-Sociology, and Jean-Marie Adiaffi, professor of African culture, philosopher and writer, were among the many who stood for the revival of Ivory Coast national identity. Their first action was to Africanize the National University of Abidjan by introducing programs in African literature, African culture, civilization, history and oral tradition. They founded a center called GRTO (Group de Recherche sur la Tradition Orale), a Research Group for African Oral Tradition led by Zadi Zaourou. The purpose of the center was to train Ivorians' minds in order to rid them of all forms of resistance, such as cultural, intellectual and political resistance, against the western system (Akindes 2003, pp.11-28).

Niangoran Bouah taught drumology to his students, who were encouraged to dress in African clothes and go back to their villages, not to teach but to learn from

the elders. African rituals were performed during Master's and Doctoral graduation ceremonies. Bernard Zadi Zaourou taught African theater at the National University. Many of his plays were performed in theaters for the purpose of revalorizing Ivory Coast cultural identity.

On the other hand, those intellectual elites were also opposed to Felix Houphouët-Boigny's political system, which they considered to be in an agreement with France, the ex-colonial power. From 1960 to 1970, Memel Foté and Niangoran Bouah were arrested and sent to jail. Zadi Zaourou and his father were also jailed for a time period. One of them, Ernest Boka, was killed in the 1970s. In the 1990s, Jean-Marie Adiaffi, the African philosopher and writer, addressed the revival of the Ivory Coast traditional religion called Bossonism. Bossonism is the science of African spirit. Bosson in the local language means "Akan spirit." For him, Ivorians must turn back to their religion because Christianity and Islam were imported and imposed by the Europeans during colonization. For Adiaffi, Bossonism is the religion for the modern Ivorian, free, conscious, and responsible for the future of his country. He wrote a novel entitled "The Identity Card" (Adiaffi 1983). The main character was a prince before the advent of colonization who lost his identity card. He was arrested by French authorities for violating "the law of the identity card." The prince attempted to prove his identity through oral tradition by asking them to check with the people of his village. According to the oral tradition, you can use the epic to find a person's origin, his ancestors and so on. Adiaffi used this allegory to portray the loss of African identity through the colonial system. Therefore, he suggested to African people that they find their identity in their religion, Bossonism (Duchesne 2000, pp.229-314). Consequently, the concept of *Ivirité* was extended in its application to politics. Unfortunately, this has contributed to fracturing the social fabric of the Ivory coast.

2.2. Ivirité and Politics

In 1993, after the death of the first president, Felix Houphouët-Boigny, his Prime Minister Alassane Ouattara, a northerner, Muslim and the president of the National Assembly, and Henri Konan Bédié, a Christian from the south, went through a struggle of succession. Henri Konan Bédié came out the winner, stressing the fact that his rival, Alassane Ouattara, was a non-Ivorian. His "Dioula" origin, the ethnic group from the north of the country also existing in the bordering countries of Burkina Faso and Mali, was classified as voltaïque (Miran 2006). Henri Konan Bédié gained support from the elites, the defenders of Ivory Coast identity. Zadi Zaourou was appointed chief of the Department of Culture and Jean Marie the chief of the Religious Department. Henri Konan Bédié became a nationalist in order to affirm and legitimize his political power. A project by Niangoran Bouah, known as

CURDIPHE: Cellule Universitaire de Recherche et de Diffusion des Idées et Actions Politiques du Président Henri Konan Bedié (*Academic Research to Promote the Ideas of Henri Konan Bedié*), published an official document titled "'Ivoirité' or the spirit of President Henri Konan Bedié's new social contract."

At first, the term "Ivoirité" was introduced to Ivorians as a cultural and political concept that emphasized Ivory Coast identity. The concept of Ivoirité was then used as an ethnic confessional sectarianism toward northerners and Muslims, and it would become a major point of discrimination in the struggle for political power in Ivory Coast (Akindes 2003, pp.11-28). A word of caution is due here on the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism. Ivoirité is about nationalism—a sense of belonging to the Ivorian nation, regardless of ethnic affiliation. However, the "intellectual" basis of Ivoirité as defined by President Bedié and his supporters is closely linked to Akan identity (Houphouët and Bedié's ethnic group). Moreover, Ivoirité is interpreted, not only by international observers, but also by Ivorians, as defining ethnic divisions. Accordingly, it is hard to draw a sharp distinction between national and ethnic identity. Therefore, it is justified to treat Ivorian nationalist policies as ethnic policies, although this involves a certain simplification.

In 1995 President Henri Konan Bedié introduced into the public discourse the concept of Ivoirité, whose initial goal according to its advocates was to strengthen national identity. Unfortunately, as this concept gained momentum, it ended up becoming a factor of exclusion from political participation and citizenship for some citizens alleged to be immigrants from neighboring countries. The concept of Ivoirité was legitimized in the 2000 constitution, which restricted presidential candidates to those citizens who were only born in Ivory Coast and from Ivorian parents (both parents). This law excluded many potential candidates, the most prominent of which was Alassane Dramane Ouattara, former prime minister under President Felix Houphouët-Boigny, who was accused of being a citizen of neighboring Burkina Faso. Therefore, he was ineligible to run for the presidency in Ivory Coast. Additionally, this new law called into question non-Ivorians' rights and access to land (Hofnung 2005, pp.29-31; ICG 2003, pp.2-3).

Property ownership and land rights are vital to the livelihood of most West Africans. In this case, the dispossessed were mainly Muslim, either from the northern part of Ivory Coast or from the neighboring countries of Mali and Burkina Faso. Therefore, it was easy to portray the discrimination as a strategy against the so-called "Dioula" northerners, who also happened to constitute the bulk of Ouattara's supporters. This politicization of identity based on national origin has become a divisive force that has torn the social fabric of this once prosperous country (Sany 2010, p.5). Recently, political tensions have been on the rise again after the government issued an arrest warrant for Guillaume Soro, a presidential candidate

and former rebel leader. His forces swept Ouattara to power in 2011, but he has since fallen out with the president. Another civil war will negatively impact the 10 years effort to rebuild the economy in Ivory Coast. The recommendations suggested could effectively prevent future conflict related to national identity and nationality.

3. Recommendations

The restoration of peace in Ivory Coast requires an identity shift on both sides. The resolution of the Ivoirité issue, which is a complex identity question, requires an unfreezing of both parties. A dialogue should be held on the issue of Ivoirité. The feelings of those in the northern part of Ivory Coast, who have been victims of rejection, torture and citizenship refusal, should be exposed. The complex of identity superiority that generated the conflict should also be exposed. A forum for both sides should be held to reflect on the question of national identity and citizenship. For example, an effort to redefine the concept of Ivoirité to foster national identity could be helpful. The result of this forum should be to propose the result to the government, the National Assembly, for action. Meanwhile the acknowledgment of wrongs from both sides could make it easier for victims to let go of their anger and need for revenge. The process could create conditions to promote a shift of identity and relationship. Every party would be able to move out of the past and imagine a positive future together: a future that will create an absence of existential threat, but also the freedom to live together and build the nation as one Ivorian people. A safe environment in each community should be created to listen to victims and perpetrators for the sake of healing. The process needs to include a component that addresses the emotional trauma of victims (Davis and Vigani 2013).

On April 5th, 2011, at the 273rd meeting of the African Union Peace and Security Council, a communiqué was issued which concluded that Ivory Coast is entering a new era of peace and stability. Although there are signs of progress in the economic sector, which need to be encouraged, if there is no security or reconciliation it will affect the effort towards socio-economic development. The African Union expressed its concern for Ivory Coast and called upon the government to take necessary measures to foster peace and reconciliation (African Union Peace and Security Council Report 2011). Ivory Coast has another opportunity to experience again the stable time period that followed the country's independence, if the reconciliation process is successful. On the other hand, if there is a failure, the country may fall into another civil war. Hopefully this paper will be helpful to the government of Ivory Coast to make important progress in the sectors of security, justice and reconciliation before the 2020 presidential election. Finally, peace will not come in Ivory Coast unless an effective post-conflict strategy is implemented which consists of addressing economic, social justice, and security at

the same time. A national forum should be held to discuss the concept of Ivoirité, not just in terms of social or political exclusion, but its cultural and inclusive factors. The process of building a national identity will certainly take time, but the effort will lead to a more stable and prosperous nation.

Conclusion

Identity-based conflict is often mistaken for dispute over material resources. Attempts to resolve such misdiagnosed conflict generally fail because the resolution does not address the root of the issue. Addressing identity issues can be complex, because opponents often view one another as evil, non-human, and they express no concern for the other's feelings. The question needs to be addressed in depth through long-term dialogue. Educational programs should be implemented to clear the misconceptions and misunderstanding about the notion of identity and citizenship (Strickland 2001, p.225). In addition, sitting down with the opponent can be a threat to one's own identity, so even beginning efforts at reconciliation can be extremely difficult. Hence the first step in effective resolution is correctly identifying a conflict as an identity conflict. Identity based conflict is based on people's psychology, culture, basic values, shared history and beliefs. Identity conflicts threaten people's basic needs and very survival. These issues tend to be more abstract, ambiguous and intangible. Identity conflicts may be expressed as material disputes, to give focus to the parties' concerns. Material disputes may evolve into identity conflicts, as the disputants invest themselves in the dispute and come to identify their positions. Once the root of the conflict has been correctly analyzed, the next step toward resolution is making explicit the sources of identity threat and insecurity, and the parties' needs. Resolution proceeds by having the parties dialogue about their needs and values. In this study, the root of the conflict in Ivory Coast has been identified as an identity crisis, known as the concept of Ivoirité. The quest for identity by Ivory Coast scholars turned to a rejection of people considered as non-Ivorians because of their ethnicity or religious beliefs. Finally, it was legitimized in the 2000 constitution and targeted specific people, such as Alassane Ouattara. A fighter of the September 2002 rebel "new forces" condensed their arguments: "We needed a war because we needed our identity cards. Without an identity card you are nothing in this country." For that Ivory Coast suffered almost nine years of violent conflict. After these years of civil and political unrest, the issue of identity is still underlying in the consciousness of many Ivorians. Many political opponents and their supporters still believe their country is ruled by a non-Ivorian. Also, the children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of those who immigrated are now regarded as "foreigners" without a true claim to belong to the new polity. Yet they are in the land of their birth and lifelong residence and have no claim on the protection of any state. Millions of them thus presumed to have the right to exercise citizenship rights, including the right to vote or stand for office or receive an official appointment (Manby 2009, pp.1-3). Will the Ivory Coast succeed in building an inclusive nation despite all these ethnic, religious and political challenges? The future of the nation is in the hands of the political leaders but also in the hands of its citizens.

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