

Economic and ecological impasse in rural Ivory Coast
A report on the Tura in Western Ivory Coast based on local analysis

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Continuation to an analysis (available on request) of the political situation in Ivory Coast after the mediation of Thabo Mbeki and before his negative report to the U.N., August 31, 2005

Beyond survival

In this situation of pervasive deprivation and total absence of external incentives for development,¹ what else could one expect to find than a population in a state of despondency, reduced to the desperate quest for day-to-day survival? Indeed, the prevailing situation in Western Ivory Coast is one of zero development in almost every respect: no schools in the villages, no economy worthy of its name, no Ngo's, no health services, no banks, no agricultural extension services. Main roads, like that from Duekoué to Man and Touba are in good state because they were built well, but also because there is very little traffic there apart from military vehicles and some rare bush taxis. People cannot afford mobility as before because of the numerous checkpoints levying taxes from them.²

The Western area had been declared a "no-go zone" in the first months of the war by the then High Commissioner of UNHRC; not even rescue workers were allowed to go there. This has changed – the Red Cross is there, Children's relief work is there; Médecins sans frontières run the hospital in Man, the only one functioning in a vast area inhabited by many hundreds of thousands of people. Local sport teachers trained by the Swiss-based "Sport pour la Paix" organise games for children of different ethnic groups, thus paving the way for a future without the ethnic tension which some take – erroneously – to be the main cause rather than a side-effect of the war.

¹ "We are today in a prison as we were never before," said one of the elders of Gouané who had seen the French governor carried around the villages on a litter in his younger years.

² DG-203:96.

But for the population “no-go” has become “no-future”, not for themselves, not for their children. None of those children who were borne after the outbreak of the war, when all officials left for fear of execution by the rebels, has been administratively registered.³

As for the children at school age, the big centers such as Man have re-opened their schools. But in the villages, three years will have gone by without formal education being offered on a regular basis.⁴

Not only did public service collapse overnight; the merchants and all those well-to-do people who had remained after the first attacks and the following reconquest by government troops were evacuated by the French end of November 2002 when rebel troops captured the city of Man for the second time. Almost all of them had lost all their belongings in the looting which took place until the rebel authorities put an end to it by inflicting draconic punishments on the looters. As said above, civil servants, including teachers, nurses and agricultural extension workers, had fled the area already at the initial onslaught of rebel forces. After the second hemorrhage of well-to-do inhabitants of Man and its surroundings, no purchasing power was left for buying the produce which used to be brought to the markets by the women from the village. Therefore the women no longer had the cash they need for buying “soup”⁵, which is

³ D-103, “9.25.

⁴ DG-203:451-487: For details, see the concordant testimonies from two women, one a younger woman from Gouréné, in the Southeast, and one an old woman from Kpata, in the Northwest. When, in the course of the first group interview in Kpata, January 2004, a group of villagers were asked to comment on the negative effects of the war, the women present were quick to point to the fact – the very first consequence they mentioned – that *né kéá kalang lé kôo* ‘child some-NEG school in any’ “No children are going to school.” (Kpata: D-102:292) In some cases, makeshift measures were attempted, using young people with basic education for filling the gap (DG-203:460ff.; Dio: D-103, “9.25). The conclusion drawn by the old illiterate lady from Kpata seems recapitulate accurately the current state-of-affairs: *Kalaŋ àa bhe wéenle sàanle kôo*. ‘There is currently no school in the Tura country.’ Projects, including those for renovating the school buildings in Kpata – which were built in the early 70-ies, and are now in a dangerous state of decay – came to a halt (D-102:1816f.)

⁵ *zéín*, French ‘sauce’, comprises everything which makes eating a worthy occupation beyond just filling one’s stomach. See the difference between “staple” and “soup” in Padmanabhan (2004:151). The old lady from Kpata says: *Wàà à ló ke bhaèèn àa bhe le?* ‘Who buys it when no one is there?’ (DG-203:163).

considered to be their monetary contribution to nutrition and family wellbeing. The bottom line is that the region has developed “backwards”⁶.

A particular aspect of this regression is the diminution of ethnic diversity. Only the ethnic groups native to the region of Man are still there, all others have gone.⁷

“Zéín –pòòn” and palm-leaf brooms as gauges of variation of gender relations

Not being able to supply “soup” by generating income through para-agricultural activities is one of the most serious setbacks from the standpoint of Tura women, and one for which a remedy had to be imperatively found. For not only does the lack of economic opportunity deprive them of an important means of supplying basic needs of their families, but it also negatively affects their position in the gender balance.

In rural societies and traditional village economies, income-generating activities of women are intimately linked up with labor division between the sexes. Setting aside in space and time domains of activity which are under control of the women has been widely reported in West Africa, and in Africa in general (Dolphyne 1991:57ff.; Schäfer 1995, Schäfer on Zimbabwe##). As far as the Tura are concerned, the well-documented socio-economic sample analysis in Böni (1993, ch. 5), provides an excellent gender-sensitive general background against which the present situation can be meaningfully contrasted.⁸

Producing additional ingredients for the nutritional cycle depending on seasonal variation, is one aspect of Tura women’s subsidiary activities, income-generation is another. Both aspects

⁶ DG-203:99-106. Although exactions and cruelties of war have subsided, the net result is summarized in these words: *Ké koà séé ké daayèa zía* ‘But our region has receded/sloped backwards’ (99). For the notion of negative development, see “Development and anti-development – a bi-polar conception of development”.

⁷ DG-203:102-105.

⁸ For the economic division of labor between men and women, she writes (Böni 1993:44): “Dans les deux villages [Dozéré et Kanta, le premier, toura, dans la S/P de Gbonné; le second, yacouba-mahou, dans la S/P de Biankouma], il faut noter que les femmes et les hommes ont un budget séparé et géré de façon indépendante.” It is true that the Tura village which provided the setting for Böni’s study, Dozéré, is not the same as those which have been and are in the current focus of attention of LAGSUS research. Nevertheless, almost all relevant parameters on which Böni’s conclusions are based, are generally valid for other Tura villages in the mountainous part of their habitat.

are subsumed under the name of *z'én*, and both are complementary and mutually supportive as factors of the micro-economy of the individual household. Nevertheless they must be kept apart if one wants to understand the effect of the war on the social position of women. In fact, as a consequence of war and of the ensuing disruption of local economies, women may be prevented from earning money, but may still be able to produce “soup” from their backyard planting activity.

Their insistence on earning money as well and regaining the economic ground torn from them by unprecedented events cannot be explained by the need for ensuring physical survival alone. Another explanation is needed.

Under normal „pre-war“ conditions, *z'én* identifies a domain not only of complementarity but also of rivalry between the sexes. The crucial question is who controls the use of additional, new resources, due to women’s para-agricultural activities, but not strictly needed for the classical “soup”. While in the case of small cash earned through sale of vegetables etc. on the market, there is little controversy as to the woman’s right to dispose of the money which she earns, the extension of the female ownership principle to innovative income-generating activities has been fiercely contested in Tura society. It gave rise to the widely quoted saying attributed to men of a certain village: *Nóhò-le, kō-le kó àh-le sī’ za le.*⁹ ‘The women - we (men) are the ones who married *them* (not vice-versa)’, expressing a claim of ownership of the husbands over money earned by their wives by virtue of the marriage contract and the bride-price.

Partially at least, it is in this context of competition and, at the same time, of re-negotiation of the terms of the traditional gender contract that the insistence of the women – in general – on preserving their domain of independent economic activity, or recreating it under the conditions of changing economic conditions, is to be understood.

⁹ For a detailed linguistic and pragmatic analysis for this quasi-proverbial sentence, see Bearth (in preparation), *Understanding Focus*, chapter 4.

Calculated in monetary terms, the contribution of the women to household economy under “normal” pre-war conditions was by far inferior to that of the men. Even after the plunge of producer’s prices for coffee and cocoa due to the combined effect of the price drop on the world market and structural adjustment programs imposed by international creditors during the early 90-ies,¹⁰ male income from cash crops had remained by far the most important source of revenue. It was from this money that school fees, travel expenses, health care, administrative taxes and community levies were to be paid. Last but not least, investment in innovations both for individual and community purposes, i.e. development, as well as repair and maintenance, i.e. sustainability in a primary, mainly technical sense, also depended on the availability of money from this same source.¹¹

By comparison, revenue obtained through female para-agricultural activities counted as small cash and was allocated, apart from zéín, to vestimentary purposes and various minor needs for themselves and the children. All the more significant was its gender-ideological importance for the women themselves, and the way it affected relations between the sexes. Changes of the economic weight relation on the one hand tend to provoke rivalry and contention over ownership, and on the other hand are mirrored in changing gender relations.¹² The progressive decline and instability of male income tended to give more relative weight to the female contribution to the micro-economic balance with ultimate long-term effects on the ideological gender balance.

Several recordings from both sexes taken shortly before the outbreak of the war show that the balance was getting more delicate, even then, and was in fact on the verge of tipping over in

¹⁰ The Ivorian « Caisse de stabilisation », which served to compensate the difference between guaranteed producer prices and world market purchasing prices had to be dissolved in the early 80-ies as part of the structural adjustment program.

¹¹ See Böni (1993 :44). The visualized difference of income from cash crops on the one hand and vegetable cultivation on the other (ibid., Fig. 5.3), which correlates almost 100% with male-controlled vs. female-controlled activities (see p. 39, Tab. 5.1), strikes the eye.

¹² See the women’s discussion recorded on this subject on July 2, 1964.

favour of the women, at least rhetorically¹³. The unfavorable macro-economical factors tended to reduce the economic strength of men, and yet, these very same factors created a favorable micro-economical environment for women to develop their entrepreneurial potential beyond the roles assigned to them in the traditional order guaranteed by the authority of the elders, yet without any need for challenging the latter rhetorically.¹⁴ The men were generally, at this point, aware of changing roles of women in society and were, as much as can be said from group interviews (among men only), supportive of it. They were also more conscious of male dependency on women, even to the point where – at least at household level – women would always be involved in decision-making.¹⁵

Summarizing the immediate pre-war situation in matters of gender – as reflected in several group interviews taken in 2001 and 2002, i.e. 12 years after Böni's research – with Böni's account of the socio-economic gender balance in a Tura village around 1990, gender relations were definitely changing. In 2002, these changes were openly acknowledged by both sides. The tendency of the changes went clearly in the direction of strengthening the position of the women in the society, mainly reflecting her increasing recognition not only in her procreative, caretaking and supporting function in agricultural activities, but also in her role as income generator.

Given the clear evidence for these tendencies at work in the immediate pre-war setting in Tura country, could one say that the effects of the war on gender relations merely accelerated an

¹³ One man, when asked during a public interview if according to him the women still respected the men answered: "The *men* respect the *women*." (Seminar notes, Sept. 16, 2002)

¹⁴ « Le pouvoir de décision villageois est dans les mains du chef et des notables. Leur accord est nécessaire pour tout changement au niveau du village, même si celui-ci touche surtout les femmes. » (Böni 1993 :54) . Böni's report of the situation in Dozéré, as compared to that in Kanta (Böni 1993 :52f.), conveys the general impression of a fully participatory climate of inclusive dialogue, without discrimination of age and sex, with the sole proviso that the village chief had the final decision.

¹⁵ Recordings taken shortly before the war in particular from Benomba (Sept. 12, 2002) and Kpata (women's group, Sept. 15, 2002) will have to be analyzed in the light of recent hypotheses on changing gender relations among the Tura. See transcript *Gbonbha020912-gs*, p. 26ff. and Minutes *IW meeting minutes 020916/Gender*. From these sources, one would hypothesize that change in the perception of gender roles, as evident in many concordant male statements uttered at this stage, do in fact reflect changes in the economic balance. Essential factors of change were at this point: (i) Women impose their right to be respected by virtue of their increased economic power; (ii) the value of a wife is no longer measured primarily by the bride-price paid for her – a fact which both weakens her position – the bride-price provided leverage for good treatment - and opens up alternatives such as education to be taken into account).

evolution which was already taking place and which might have led to the same result if Ivory Coast had remained the stable country as which it had been known for so long? The likely answer is no. The hypothesis according to which changes in the balance of relative economic strength of the sexes is reflected in a changed perception of gender asymmetries certainly needs to be examined with caution, particularly one needs to take into account the difference of time lag factors affecting the socio-cultural and the socio-economic domains. However, to the extent that there is some truth to it, the sudden irruption of civil unrest in a previously relatively stable situation and the radically disruptive effect on local economies resulting from it should be expected to favor a more radical reshuffling of gender relations than would have taken place under “normal” circumstances.

Yorola, the old lady, coming from what may well be one of the regions least affected by the gruesome aspects of the war,¹⁶ summarizes with impressive clairvoyance the state of the economy of her village, Kpata, exactly one and a half years after the region came under rebel control: *fēyaa* ‘poverty’ is the key word, reinforced by a intensifying ideophone (*tèkéké*), repeated over and over again, and supplemented by a graphic analogy, in terms of which cash had become so thin that looking through a banknote, one can count the objects on the other side, instead of counting your money.¹⁷ Abstracting from this suggestive note, I owe this illiterate old lady, who was our next-door neighbour forty years ago, a lucid if succinct picture of the two major immediate causes of *fēyaa*:

- (i) Contrary to the dependence on timely and sufficient rainfall which might positively or negatively affect coffee and cocoa harvests under normal circumstances, the absence of regular commercial outlets as a consequence of the

¹⁶ In accordance with her own words (D-203:170-71).

¹⁷ D-203 :145-154.

war made even the best harvest counterproductive, thus annihilating the basis of male income.¹⁸

- (ii) There is no market either, although for other reasons, which would allow women to sell their modest home-grown products. Female income, too, is annihilated.¹⁹

This is a good example of what I propose to call *local analysis*. It is confirmed by macro-economic correlates constructed from outside sources:

- (iii) The flow of goods towards the south, via the French-held “zone de confiance”, to the ports, remains totally blocked. All commercial activities have been re-oriented towards the west and the north across the – now largely fictitious - borders with Guinea and Mali, via channels traditionally controlled by Manding merchants.²⁰
- (iv) This “escape route” is only open for goods which are not perishable and whose transport cost can be kept within reasonable limits – a condition which favours export of non-comestibles from forest regions bordering on the savanna, as is the case of the Tura mountains. Hence the quasi-industrial boom of brooms made from the nervure of palm leaves.²¹

There is, by the way, ample testimony to the fact that Tura women tried alternative products and marketing strategies - some of them quite imaginative – as remedies to the economic conundrum, only to find that no markets existed for these alternatives: beans, orchards, pork, poultry, attiéké. Diversification was a correct idea but which could not work at this stage for lack of economic outlets. Pilot projects of poultry farming had been successfully introduced in some places before the war but, being dependent for their maintenance on medication from

¹⁸ The west, even more than the north, is completely cut off from the economic life in the south and from export via the sea ports. Exporting cash products towards Guinea and Mali, if it works at all, does so on derisory conditions.

¹⁹ See the graphic description of women throwing their goods to the garbage in DG-203:564-572, contrasting the previous state with the present one.

²⁰ Not surprisingly, local perception sees these merchants, called Dioulas, as one of two classes of beneficiaries, the other being those who have joined the rebellion and their kin (DG-203 :592ff.).

²¹ See photos and the video recording V-1.

the agricultural extension services, they were doomed to fail when the latter ceased to operate after the takeover.

It is against the backdrop of this economic impasse that the shift from vegetable-market-oriented-bound income-producing activities to the palm leaf broom industry with its disastrous ecological consequences becomes understandable. It purports to be a desperate move to safeguard a minimal source of cash for partially compensating for the loss of both the male and the female basis of income in normal times.

It should be made clear, however, that the practice of fabricating brooms from palm leaves is by no means innovative but has been in use for a long time (Boni 1993:90 top). What is new is that it has become the only source of revenue and is therefore practiced at an industrial scale, threatening to destroy the ecological balance and one of the most important and most characteristic resources²² of the Toura natural heritage.

The ecological impasse

MAP

The Tura eco-system owes its particular characteristics to the hybrid, heterogeneous location of the area inhabited by the Tura. Its southern, mountainous part is on the one hand an extension of the vast forest zone skirting the Gulf of Guinea, and on the other hand the westernmost outpost of the Guinea Ridge extending from the Futa Djallon towards central Ivory Coast. To the north, its border shifts far into the vast plateau inhabited by Manding, Jula-speaking populations, and thus partakes of the dry climatic conditions typical of the savannah. The Monts Toura, considered its core area in terms of demographic weight, is part of a vast natural system of reservoirs watering the lowlands of western central Ivory Coast, through the Sassandra – on which it borders to the east and which feeds into the huge electricity power complex of the Bia dam south of the line Duékoué and Daloa. and its tributaries. Of the latter, the most important is the Bafing river, which, originating from the region of Sipilou in neighbouring Dan, near the Guinean border, flows from west to east through the northern Tura plain before reaching the Sassandra, which, from north to south, limits the Tura domain to the east,.

The dual nature of the Tura eco-system reflects 1. the geographic situation of the Tura habitat on and across the border between the two major zones of climate in which it partakes: the damp wet tropical climate of the southern forest of the Gulf of Guinea and the dry savannah extending to the north towards the sahel both influence the conditions. In a west to east perspective, the Tura mountains are the last el The rugged mountain

²² Holas (1962).

relief of the southern part its gallery forests, an abundance of natural palm groves (*Elaeis guineensis*) in the southern, most densely populated area, gallery forests provide an environment. Vegetation includes oth

To this diversity of the//varied natural environment corresponds the diversity of the vegetation and fauna on the one hand, and of cultivation on the other hand. All this is included in a complex but essentially homogeneous body of local knowledge who the Tura language. This diversity is threatened by a number of ecological accidents, in fact one could say, local catastrophies:

The sustainability of the natural equilibrium has been severely threatened by has been altered since the 1970-ies by

- (i) massive deforestation by logging companies, authorized by the government and supported by client;
- (ii) the destruction of the palm groves by exploitation of the palm trees for the commerce with brooms at a quasi-industrial scale, a consequence of the war;
- (iii) overexploitation of the soils
- (iv) bushfires

The Mount Sangbé

- (v) the complete destruction of the natural forest environment of the Bafing, with irreversible consequences on natural resources:
 - a. the diversity of species of trees which was a major source of bark-based pharmacopoeia has vanished;
 - b. the diversity of animal species has totally disappeared, among them the caterpillar zuwéé < is this an animal? > which was a major source of proteine until 1995;
 - c. The rhythm of evacuation of the surplus water from the rainy season is slowed down considerably, resulting in long term mutation of fertile soils into swamps;
 - d. Thus, in the rainy season (July/August), the Bafing now floods the plains of Guanlé, devastating plantations and reducing the zone of productivity. People are surprised: in former times, the river did not reach our coffee plants.
- (vi) deforestation
- (vii) language embodies a local knowledge subsystem that forms a human ecological network of dense fine-tuned multiple interaction with the natural eco-system,
- (viii) grown over centuries. It is essentially co-extensive with the natural eco-system in the present case but areas of overlap are normal.
- (ix)
 - a. Example Bafing
 - i. Bafing + guanlíi. The destruction of the Bafing forest is complete.
 - ii. The caterpillar zuwéé which was a major source of proteine until 1995 has disappeared, its living setting having been destroyed.
 - iii. The diversity of trees which was a major source of bark-based pharmacopoeia has also „taré“.
 - iv. In the rainy season (July/August), the Bafing now floods the plains of Guanlé, devastating plantations and reducing the zone of productivity. People are surprised: in former times, the river did not reach our coffee plants.
 - v. The rhythm of evacuation of the surplus water is slowed down very considerably, resulting in long term mutation of fertile soils into swamps.

- vi. The effects of the micro-system on the larger regional eco-system are non-negligeable but still need to be analysed, and their perception to be recorded.
- b. the Monts Tura are part of the natural water reservoir for much of the vast plains of central and lower Ivory Coast. 20-30 sources. The Guinea ridge of which the Toura mountains are part is the water reservoir of West Africa. The Mt. Baa is a sort of sponge which waters the region of Guanne and all the surroundings It cannot be exploited because it is so wet.
- c. Language policy: language embodies a local knowledge subsystem that forms a human ecological network of dense fine-tuned multiple interaction with the natural eco-system, grown over centuries. It is essentially co-extensive with the natural eco-system in the present case but areas of overlap are normal. Language therefore constitutes the major human resource that gives access to this interaction between the human and the natural ecosystem.
- d. Minority language policy. In hindsight, one could have argued in favor of a broad-filter language policy, attempting e.g. to exploit underlying similarities between at least Dan and Tura, and perhaps even Guro. (Historically grown, there is also a joking relationship between Tura and Senufo.)
- e. Could one have adopted a broad-filter? DF: p̄ɔ̄n kp̄áa wuuwuu (low tone?). I.e.. it would not have had the effect it has now. It would have been a big thing without use. That is what the Toura term means.