

Change and persistence in crisis : a case study from Western Ivory Coast

Thomas Bearth, University of Zurich

See also:

- ➔ Talk at VAD ... text.pdf
- ➔ Gender paradox.ppt

Western Ivory Coast has been one of the regions most deeply affected by the civil war which divided the country in a southern, government-controlled area and a northern/north-western, rebel held zone for almost five years, between September 19, 2002, and the bonfire of reconciliation in Bouaké on July 30, 2007, which marked the official end of the conflict. The LAGSUS project (www.lagsus.de), sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation and supported by the Swiss Centre of Scientific Research in Ivory Coast, was able to maintain its presence on both sides of the political divide throughout the crisis, adding to its original focus - « Language, Gender and Sustainability » - a participative look at local survival strategies and, in the pre-post-crisis period, at what one might call a “development revival”, particularly among the Tura in the mountainous area north of Man. The outbreak of the war had been followed by the overnight vanishing of state authority and the collapse of all income-generating activities. The production of brooms from oil palms, traditionally a stopgap solution for poor women, but now practiced on an almost industrial scale, became the key to collective survival and led to a temporary inversion of the balance of economic strength in favour of the women. Yet, while male leaders openly acknowledged their economic dependency on the women, there was and is no move to acknowledge women’s economical leadership by allowing them to actively participate in public assemblies, called *kono*, and in decision-processes from which they are traditionally excluded. The women, while ready to defend their economic autonomy and to withstand the prevailing interpretation, based on the bride-price, of ultimate male ownership of all that belongs to them, seem to remain indifferent to the opportunity to seek empowerment in the public arena which they were denied in the gerontocratic system. Traditional gender asymmetry with, at its heart, an explicit notion of female dependency remains, paradoxically, a binding reference and a key to social cohesion. Yet geographical isolation and the inertia of local traditions in their remote resident area alone cannot adequately explain Tura female conservatism. Surprisingly or not, the same concepts remain deeply entrenched among Tura women having lived for years, some for their whole adult life, in the peri-urban diaspora of Greater Abidjan, virtually cut off from the rural home area, and in spite of the rural-urban cleavage which has become deeper as a consequence of

the political bipartition. Explanatory hypotheses drawing on longitudinal inquiries by researchers of both sexes (Bearth, in press), most of them of Tura extraction (Mikell 1997:334), may be summarized as follows:

1. The village as a mental construct remains a central reference to which urban neighbourhoods remain paradoxically peripheral; its role as guaranty of identity, safety and linguistic wellbeing is reinforced by the crisis.
2. The traditional hierarchy of gender roles with its roots in tribal religion and in early socialization is kept alive by daily re-enactment through linguistic and other taboos.
3. Strategies of indirection offer a better chance of success than exposing one's opinion to contradiction in the public arena, and thus offer an explanation for lack of female enthusiasm for empowerment through admission to public debate.

Until his retirement as a professor of General and African linguistics at the University of Zurich three years ago, the author was secretary of the Swiss Society of African Studies. He is scientific co-ordinator of the LAGSUS project and of a Russian-Swiss research project on lexicography of minority languages in Ivory Coast sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Current interests: Significance of language and linguistics for the society at large, the application of ICT to languages, lexicology, syntax, discourse studies, and communication for development.

Publications

Bearth, Thomas,

- In press : Genre, discours public et développement local à l'épreuve de la crise – pleins feux sur le monde reclus des Toura. In : T. Bearth (éd.), *Stratégies de survie en temps de crise et dynamiques du genre : le cas toura*. Abidjan : Editions Livres Sud.
- 2006: The local language – a neglected resource for sustainable development. In: Ernest W.B. Hess-Lüttich (ed.), *Eco-Semiotics. Umwelt- und Entwicklungskommunikation*. Tübingen/Basel: Francke. 273-293. (with Diomandé Fan)
- 2007: Afrikas Sprachen: Hindernis oder Ressource? In: Thomas Bearth, Barbara Becker, Rolf Kappel, Gesine Krüger und Roger Pfister (Hrsg.), *Afrika im Wandel*. Zürich: vdf. 181-195.

Mikell, Gwendolyn (ed.) 1997. *African Feminism. The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.
This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.