

Gender dynamics and the Ivorian crisis

Book notice*

Dynamiques du genre : le cas toura. Stratégies de survie en temps de crise (ed. Thomas Bearth). Abidjan : Editions Livres Sud. 2007. 286 p. + iv color plates. Cloth, 7500 cfa. Contributors : Joseph Baya, Thomas Bearth, Rose Marie Beck, Mohamed Doumbia, Douoh Honorine Guéli, S. Jacques Silué, Douo Geneviève Singo, Lydie Vé Kouadio. Preface by François A. Adopo.

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This book approaches the problematic of gender in Africa specifically from the point of view firstly of development and secondly of language. Based on research undertaken in response to a Call on “Key issues of the Humanities” issued by the German Volkswagen Foundation,[†] it examines this triangular relationship in the particular, highly revealing context of the recent politico-military crisis in Ivory Coast.

The first part of the book presents a series of state-of-the-art articles on the general question of gender. These show from various perspectives how gender relations are at the heart of a society’s problematic, like a seismograph of its dynamics and at the same time one of its driving forces. They also show the crucial role of language-in-use in orienting speakers to this dynamics, and how gender is constructed and deconstructed by means of the words of a language and through its discourse: Bearth’s Introduction examines this question with regard to marriage and dowry; Silué’s contribution concerns the pejorative connotations of terms referring to the female sex; and Beck deals with linguistic ambiguity as a strategy for societal innovation among East African women. Doumbia, while not focusing specifically on language, provides an overview of the evolution of gender studies and their relevance for development. Part 2 consists of a multifaceted case study focusing on the Tura people in Western Ivory Coast. The point of departure is the observation that as a people the Tura, while not rejecting development, tend to make acceptance of innovation depend on the use of a specific discourse protocol for collective processing of news and innovative messages, called *kono*, whose purpose it is to ensure that every member of the receiving group understands the issue and has a chance to express his opinion on it. Observations of this kind confirm the relevance of language as a key factor in development and led to the formulation of the concept of *communicative sustainability* as a prerequisite to acceptance of innovation and sustainability in development (p. 14).

Tura society, though protected from open fighting and wanton destruction by virtue of its

* This text is based on a translation from French by Dr. Richard Chadwick.

† Similar research also sponsored by Volkswagen Foundation was carried out in several countries under the label of LAGSUS (Language, Gender and Sustainability) between 2003 and 2007. See www.lagsus.de.

geographical isolation, was undeniably shaken to its foundations by the Ivorian civil war, with noticeable side-effects on traditional gender relations (Baya, Guéli). While an emerging paradigm of perceived equality between men and women at household level can be traced to pre-war pressures on male-generated cash crop income, the crisis sparked a more radical reversal in the balance of economic power between men and women (Bearth). In the wake of that economic shock, a dialogue between the sexes was instigated in which the topic of traditional roles of men and women is no longer taboo.

Yet, in spite of at least one well documented case of attempted renegotiation of the “gender contract” (Vé Kouadio), by and large, the authors of this volume are reluctant to conclude that the crisis sounded the death knell of the old order based on male dominance and the prerogatives of elders. One of the reasons for their reserve on this point is that Tura women themselves do not at all seem keen to take advantage of the opportunity that the crisis afforded them to change the inherited, exclusively male-dominated public order which denies them the right to full participation in public consultation and decision-making processes such as the *kono*. While their de facto leadership in responding to the onslaught of extreme poverty is frankly acknowledged by their male counterparts, one needs to be cautious about interpreting this acknowledgment as an irreversible evolutionary step in gender relations, especially as women leaders themselves continue to publicly affirm their moral and factual dependence on men as a prerequisite for female empowerment and meaningful actorhood in matters of economy and development (Singo). Persistence of traditional role models of women (Baya) and social constructs and constraints associated with the exogamous clan system (Bearth) may help account for this apparently paradoxical attitude, while non-negotiable gender-marked taboo and its compensation in terms of counter-power tied to female initiation (Guéli) point to its religious roots.

As an example of participatory research, the book capitalizes on double conversancy in local language and scientific meta-language of locally socialized junior researchers, their access to local discourse both as participants and students, and corresponding competences, acquired in the specific research context, in conducting field inquiry as well as in transcribing and analysing data resulting from it. Based on these premises, “*apatam* methodology” (p. 34ff.) constitutes a natural communicative space for (almost) unlimited inclusiveness, for participatory research and for merging concerns of research and development. While relying on *apatam* methodology, its limited success in mobilizing female participation points to the persisting and pervasive difficulty of overcoming deeply entrenched language and discourse taboo that mark the gender barrier as all authors concur.

All in all, this book confronts us with a set of realities and representations to do with gender which sit uneasily with the emerging model of gender relations worldwide. In view of the current state of the question of gender in general, as set out in the first part of the book, does the Tura case attest to a belated desire, precipitated by crisis, of a remote population of this globe to align with universal trends towards equality in gender relations? Or are the traces of renegotiation of a local gender contract (found in the second part of the book) indicators of an ongoing search for an alternative paradigm of gender relations in accordance with both traditional and present-day conditions and views of life in rural Africa?

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