

## EDITORIAL: CÔTE D'IVOIRE AND BENIN: DIFFERENT BUT NOT PARALLEL TRAJECTORIES

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West Africa has long been a region of migrations. In pre-colonial times, war, trade and the search for greener pastures, fertile land and security led people to migrate across the region. Since European penetration and colonization, migration patterns have changed but have continued unabated, despite and against borders. The expansion of wage labor and the development of means of transportation have contributed further to the flow of people, goods and services. With the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS) Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and the Right of Residence and Establishment of May 1979, the integration of the region is accelerating at a rapid pace with people fleeing conflict zones, running away from poverty, hopelessness, and repressive governments, and seeking new opportunities away from their own village or towns. A remarkable feature of all those migrations is that language has not been a major issue, except for politicians or ethnic or flag chauvinists.

I studied at Université d'Abomey-Calavi in Benin, at the University of Ibadan (Nigeria) and at the Université Nationale de Côte d'Ivoire in Abidjan, and when Tejumola Olaniyan invited me to edit this issue of *West Africa Review* on Benin and Côte d'Ivoire, I understood right away that his intent was to fully expand the reach and focus of *West Africa Review* to include franco-phone countries (the majority of West Africa), and at last reproduce in the academic world the integration that is actually brewing at the level of people, goods and services in the region. I understood the intent was to break the artificial language and tradition barriers that separate academics whereas, before our eyes, European countries are merging in a steady and determined manner.

It is only befitting that this issue should include articles in French and English, before work in Portuguese is included at some point (we should not forget Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau), and before we could easily produce our research in Yoruba, Twi, Bamana, Ewe, Pulaar, Fon, Soussou, or Hausa.

Focusing on Côte d'Ivoire and Benin in this issue was founded on my personal experience (it is not easy to break away from one's personal history), but it was more strongly motivated by the particular trajectories of both countries, and the symbols they have come to represent in the history of the region since independence. However, these articles are not comparative studies. They address various aspects of politics, society and culture in both countries.

In 1990, Benin experienced a very peaceful transition from an eighteen-year old, unimaginative and breathless "Marxist," one-party political dispensation to a liberal, multiparty regime. Since then, the country has observed three political alternations, in 1991, 1996, and 2006. These tranquil transitions have created a sense among Béninois that they represent the cradle of democracy in West Africa, and that, as often occurs across the region (and in the world also to a certain extent) these days, God has blessed their country. As Mathurin Houngnikpo demonstrates in his article "*Benin's Ongoing Struggle For Democracy*" on the jolts of democracy in Benin, the rule of law as well the institutionalization of governance structures, procedures and practices are lagging and have posed the risk of derailing the democratic process. Although the Béninois take pride in their ability to engineer political alternation, although they cling to the myth in the making that their country is a peaceful and democratic haven unlike any other West African country, they have no illusion about the ability of the system to bring about meaningful and radical changes to their lives.

While Houngnikpo provides a clear and concise analysis of the political situation in Benin, Doug Fallen, in "*Good Witches and Bad Witches: The Transformation of Witchcraft in Benin*," discusses his findings about new functionalities and interpretations of witchcraft in Benin, and how they affect everyday life, power distribution and relations. He analyzes how witchcraft is being transformed to become a source of pride and a resource to support the development process. Benin is known to be the cradle of *Vodun* and the religion (wrongfully vilified and maligned) has thrived since the 10<sup>th</sup> of January be-

came the official holiday for local religions in 1996. *Vodun* beliefs and practices are commonly shared in Benin, and because they deal with lived experiences and everyday concerns, they infiltrate all aspects of people's lives, thus providing a strong foundation for cultural production. *Vodun* musical traditions constitute part of the inspiration of *Gangbé Brass Band*, an original orchestra that fuses Beninese percussions with brass instruments, lending to their music a New-Orleans jazzy feel. Philip Ojo presents the conversation he has had with them about their music, the path they are following, and the tribulations of musicians in the Beninese context in "*Gangbe Brass Band: Partager notre culture avec les autres peuples du monde.*" The review essay "*Picturing Benin: Where Insiders' and Outsiders' Lenses Converge and Diverge*" brings to life how one French, one American, and many Béninois photographers have pictured the country and its people in three photography books published in 2004 and 2005. Their gaze is inscribed in the tradition of anthropological or *National Geographic* photos, with a colonial twist to them (even in some of the pictures by Béninois photographers), but the most recent pictures by Rondeau, the French photographer, indicate a demarcation from that cliché, providing a more candid, honest and multidimensional approach to picturing the Beninese, and Africans for that matter. By centering his research on the Yoruba of Porto-Novo, Olivier Martinez uses a theoretical framework of spatial geography to problematize the multiple facets of Yoruba identity. In his article entitled "*Les visages de l'ethnicité Yoruba: Processus de formation identitaire spatialisés et mobilisation ethnique dans le cadre de la mondialisation,*" he explains how place has changed Yoruba identity over time, and how it is being re-conceptualized at a global, transcontinental level.

Côte d'Ivoire has been deeply entangled in a political crisis it is finding particularly difficult to surmount. For the first 33 years of its existence as a sovereign country, Côte d'Ivoire was ruled by Houphouët-Boigny who established a pro-French, pro-Western, neo-patrimonial rule based on his charisma and on his astute, Machiavellian manipulation of ethnic and nationalistic sentiments, of immigration, religion, repression and power, using the rhetoric of dialogue and peace. He was particularly aided by a prosperous economy. On his death, the lack of a political system separate from his personality has created a gap that his successors have had a hard time to fill out intelligently. The country is now divided into two parts: Laurent Gbagbo, the elected president, rules the South and Forces Nouvelles (New Forces), a rebel group,

controls the North. All the effort made by the “international Community” have failed, and the country is now in a situation where hope clings to the March 5, 2007, agreement reached through “inter-Ivorian dialogue”— a consultation model that directly sidelined “the international community”.

In her detail oriented paper entitled “*Houphouëtism: Reversing Multiparty Antagonism in Côte d'Ivoire*,” Jeanne Maddox-Toungara revisits the internal effort currently being made to solve the crisis. She also raises a fundamental question which, in my view, prevents Côte d'Ivoire from moving on with serenity, if it is not thrown into the public sphere for debate: an honest critique of Houphouët-Boigny's times and legacy. Clarity and courage about the past are essential in re-imagining the future. The emergence of a new leadership clean of the past dirt and ready to break away from ruling patterns cultivated in the past 45 years represents one of the conditions for a new start. This last proposition is discussed in Thomas Hofnung's book which is reviewed in “*La Côte d'Ivoire, la France et leur crise*.”

Despite the political turmoil, life continues, and Abidjan, the largest city, has retained its youthfulness, its fun-loving and cheerful character, at least on the surface. Abidjan holds the reputation of being an active crossroads and hub for cultural activities on the continent, especially for francophone playwrights, musicians and other artists. In his paper “*Alpha Blondy's Elohim and the Quest for A New Côte d'Ivoire*,” Philip Ojo analyzes how everyday life and political events inform the music of Alpha Blondy, the reggae superstar from Côte d'Ivoire, and how in turn, his music becomes an active and critical site for shaping and re-shaping the nation.

All countries in West Africa, including Bénin and Côte d'Ivoire, share high levels of poverty, which is often gauged in economic terms. Weaving his argumentation around the concept of economic, social and cultural rights articulated by Danièle Lochak, Francis Akindès proposes to broaden our understanding of poverty to include and prioritize its psychosocial dimension in “*Pauvreté et construction de droits en Afrique*.” Such a re-conceptualization of poverty would target psychological and cultural underpinnings of poverty and allow governments to move away from the current extraverted model of relying on international organizations and intervention for poverty alleviation. As a consequence, the poor themselves will build the confidence, consciousness, dispositions and resolve necessary to construct and institutional-

ize the rights they need (not those dictated by the state or other international structures) to emerge from poverty.