

IVORY COAST

the slow reborn



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After its independence from France, Ivory Coast was called the « Miracle of Africa » for its religious and ethnic harmony. It remains a model for his african neighbours with a growth of 8% per year before the Covid 19, making it one of the most dynamic countries in the world.

But a military coup in 2002 split the nation in two between the north and the south. Since then, despite the instability, Ivory Coast remains the world's largest exporter of cocoa beans.

Ivory Coast excellent economic performance has not yielded the expected results in terms of reducing the poverty rate. In this contrasting context, there are many challenges to be met often led by women in a mosaic of 62 ethnic groups.



In Ivory Coast, the cocoa sector is on the verge of a new crisis. Asphyxiated by competition from the large groups based in the country, which capture all the contracts of chocolate manufacturers such as Mars or Nestlé, small Ivorian traders regularly go into fierce battles. The real challenge is to meet world demand and to take the turn of fair trade. Out of 3,000 cocoa cooperatives in Ivory Coast, a little over 200 are fair trade certified.



Twenty years ago, major brands promised to eradicate child labour in the country. But it is still happening with poor ivoirian families, and migrants children from neighbouring countries such as Mali and Burkina pushed into Ivory Coast by terrorist struggles. This generates an easy and drudgerable workforce that is difficult to control in the multitude of small cocoa farms. In West Africa , more than 2 million children work in hazardous conditions in cocoa-producing regions. A lot of the chocolate we buy always starts with child labour.



"Tell me what loincloth you wear and I will tell you who you are »say the ivorians. The loincloth (the Wax in local language) that each woman wears a message addressed to the husband, the rival, the family, or the lover. The loincloth with the pattern "my rival's eye" is worn by a woman who is ready to do anything to protect her couple. The one with the design "Darling, don't turn your back on me" means that there is a conflict in the couple. It is usually offered by a man when he has something to be forgiven. The Hibiscus Flower Wax symbolises happiness in marriage. Many women wear it!



Officially banned since 2015, skin whitening products are still very popular. However, creams for bleaching black skin can cause irreparable health damage to users: hypertension and diabetes are the most common. Pharmacies that sell them discreetly make a lot of money, and doctors also who prescribe them. One out of every two women in Abidjan still gets lighter in Abidjan.



Almost half of the population is below the poverty line. This situation contributes to generate parallel markets accessible to the weakest but also very dangerous. 600 tons of fake medicines, mostly imported from Asia, have been seized over the last 3 years in Ivory Coast, which represents a third of all medicines sold in the country. It is easy to spot shops with these signs representing an Asian elder, selling Made in China medicines.



The world learned of the plight of Ivorian refugees in early 2020 when the body of a teen boy was found dead in the landing gear of a plane coming from Abidjan. Everybody knows about the stories of Eritrean, Sudanese or Afghan refugees, but not many about Ivorians. Migration roads to the Mediterranean pass through Burkina Faso or Mali to reach Agadez in Niger. Then Libya where an unenviable fate awaits the migrants (robbery, bribery, rape, organ trafficking,...). President Alassane Ouattara promises 200,000 jobs a year in Ivory Coast, but an opinion poll reveals that a huge majority of young Ivorians dream to leave their country.



A man comes to buy karite butter in the Savanes district. This business is mainly a women labour thru small cooperatives. Karite or shea butter, which is used in make-up and food, is popular all over the world. In Africa, it is called "women's gold" because many women earn money by making and selling it. It is also used in make-up or as a substitute for cocoa butter in chocolate.



An Ivorian woman from the "Femmes battantes cooperative" ("fighters women") wraps attiéké in bags. Attiéké is a traditional couscous cooked from cassava tubers. It is one of the few things that still unite the 20 million ivorians. It is the women who manage this production: they grow the cassava, process it and sell it along the road so that travellers can spot them and stop to buy. Often, it is with this income that they can send their children to school.



The Ivorian mining industry is taking off but it remains dominated by men. Production of manganese, gold, or precious stones is a lucrative activity. Women want to change this situation. In the quarries, they are victims of exploitation that sometimes takes place clandestinely. The work is exhausting and is carried out under a blazing sun all day long.



Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who died in 1993, was the father of the independence of Ivory Coast. "Le Vieux" (the old man) liked to feed his crocodiles himself when he was in Yamoussoukro. Today, the saurians are still there, swimming in the three artificial lakes that protect the entrance to the former president's palace. Since 2012 visitors don't venture so close anymore, as Mister Dicko Toké, the old warden, who was feeding them every day, was eaten by the reptiles.



The Basilica of « Our Lady of Peace" in Yamoussoukro (248 km from Abidjan), consecrated by Pope John Paul II, is said to have cost 300 million euros. The Vatican had demanded that part of the money be used for social works. It exceeds in size St. Peter of Rome, which served as a model for it. The basilica can accommodate 200,000 people, 7,000 inside and the rest on the esplanade. Nowadays, only a few hundred people flock to sunday Mass.



62 ethnic groups can be found in Ivory Coast. One of these is the Peuls, some cattle breeders scattered throughout a dozen African countries. Many of them do not have Ivorian citizenship because the country demands that at least one of their parents be Ivorian and they do not have the proofs. With Ivorian citizenship, Peuls could find skilled jobs. Without a certificate, they cannot open a bank account or get a driving licence. The Peuls feel like foreigners in their own country.



Ivory Coast is a multi-faith country: 42% Muslims, 34% Christians and animists. 75% of Muslims live in the south, against 25% in the north. The image of a country divided between a Christian and animist south and a Muslim north is a false shortcut. For the first time in its history, Ivory Coast is led by a Muslim head of state: Alassane Ouattara. Married to a French Catholic, he has appointed Christian and Muslim clerics in several major state institutions. The government finances the pilgrimage of Muslims to Mecca, Catholics to Lourdes, Protestants and Evangelicals to the Holy Land.



In the countryside, animism is still very strong. Beliefs and ceremonies punctuate the life of the villages for the births, deaths, or celebrations. The masks are always of paramount importance, such as the Kwuya Gblen-Gbe in the Dan tribe, or the Goli among the Baule people. There is nothing folkloric in these dances, but for the inhabitants, the masks are the representations of the spirits and must be respected, otherwise you will be in terrible trouble and you can even die. The release of the masks is an event for the whole village who stops working and comes to admire them while fearing them!



Young girls dance with their bodies coated with kaolin in Aniansué. They learn to become « komians »: healers and fortune tellers. A unique school teaches this art in the Akan culture. Komians are consulted for their power to fight bad luck and predict the future. They are consulted by the country's greatest political leaders and local chiefs. The school also welcome people suffering from infertility, or major diseases, who wish to be treated by Komians.



The Senoufo people practice many religious cults. These cults are dedicated to the supreme and intermediate gods, the protective genies and the ancestors. Near the Senoufo villages, like in Shienlow, there are sacred places reserved for the deities. Only the initiates (exclusively men) to the fetishes can see them. All initiates to these cults must never divulge the secrets to the uninitiated and to women. These beliefs are not reserved for peasants, educated people follow them, and even important deals in business are not spared by these cults.



Senoufos people are famous for their wood carvings. Some works were looted at the time of french colonization and recently the Ivorian state has asked France to return a hundred masterpieces including Senoufo statues. Very popular at the beginning of the 20th century, these statues even inspired artists like Picasso...The statues are part of the Poro which are initiation rituals of a secret nature. During funerals these statues are presented to the people. Some are not allowed to be seen by everyone but only by the initiates. The idea that they are commercially exploited by art galleries in western countries shocks the Senoufos.



Towards the North of the country, in Kouto, you can discover Sudano-Sahelian mosques, looking like small replica of the malian Djenne one. Ivory Coast protects itself from the terrorist contagion with the operation called "Sealed Border". Hundreds of soldiers, policemen, and customs officers try to secure the 1116 km of borders that separate the country from Mali and Burkina Faso. An almost impossible mission: between the three countries, trade and population exchanges are permanent. If the Ivorian bolt were to break, it would be a disaster for the whole of West Africa.



On 13 March 2016, an attack claimed by AQIM killed 19 people on a beach in Grand-Bassam. Investigations showed that the Bassam terrorists were Malians. The north of Ivory Coast, with its great poverty and porous borders is a fragile area facing the temptation of muslim extremists. The attack has definitely killed tourism and leaves the old quarter classified by UNESCO as a ghost town.

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