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Avoiding gender determinism: Ivorian women between political challenges and economic recognition

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Abstract

As in many other countries, 8 March 2014 was celebrated in the Ivory Coast as another year’s International Women’s Day, serving to highlight the relevant role of women in universal development as a whole. The moment is a good one for taking a look at the progress of the question of gender in the Ivory Coast. This paper is intended to analyse the factors explaining the growing part played by women in political and economic matters in the Ivory Coast. It is also aimed at considering how women have won growing importance in both politics and the economy.

Keywords: Gender; development.

1. Introduction

According to Rocío Castro (1992:9), over the course of history different societies have created social distinctions between the sexes so as to establish power relationships to the benefit of men in various areas of society: religious, political, public, work, or cultural spheres. In the Ivory Coast, beliefs, concepts, cultural values and assigned roles have subordinated women within society, the excuse being put forward that natural laws determine these differences.

K. Young (1979) made a distinction between sex and gender. As he saw it, sex is a biological given, while gender is the outcome of socialization, beginning from birth, which may show considerable variations from one culture to another. Simone de Beauvoir (1987) summed this up well by stating that people are not born women, they become women.

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Gender also includes the question of power and development. Betina Ronsisvalle (2011:3) linked development and power with equality between the sexes at the different levels of government and in decision-making bodies. On these lines, the inclusion of women in the decision-taking circles of power, together with other positive actions, would contribute to the process of democratization in the Ivory Coast.

The relationship between gender and development is striking in the Ivory Coast. This is because women have a crucial role, both in the north and in the south of the country, as will be seen below.

This paper will address a range of topics. These include the political situation of women in the Ivory Coast and their financial impact on the economy. This second aspect will be considered from the viewpoint of the production of shea butter or karité in the north of the country and the work as servants of women from the Baoulé ethnic group (their name is sometimes spelled Baule).

2. Methodological Approach

The methods employed incorporated qualitative techniques such as participatory observation and in-depth interviews. The first observation phase took place in 2013 in Korhogo, investigating a producer of shea butter. Over the whole year the process of its manufacture was observed, with note being taken of the development opportunities created by women from the north of the country. The second observation phase was carried out in Abidjan particularly among servant women. Field work with them was undertaken in the town of Abè, in the Department of Yamoussoukro. Of the five studied, two in particular attracted attention because of the topic under consideration: servant women as agents of development. This topic was addressed by observing women at a strategic point: the Easter or “Paquinou” festivities among the Baoulé. The degree of participation adopted was as recommended by Barbara Kawulich (2005). As this author sees it, the researcher in this context indeed forms part of the group under study, this group being aware of the research activity under way, and the participation being a fact. This was the state of affairs in the present study. In-depth interviews were also vital, since, as pointed out by Juan José Pujadas Muñoz (1992: 44-45), they are crucial when researchers are working on a group with which they share features and characteristics. The real names of the informants have been retained here, since they had no objections to this decision.

3. Analysis of Women’s Political Struggles in the Democratic Process in the Ivory Coast

The part played by Ivorian women in the social movements that have taken place over recent decades in the Ivory Coast as a reaction to conflicts affecting the poorer classes has been preponderant. Mari Koré and Raggi Anne Marie were leaders in demanding human rights. Despite this protagonism, Ivorian women have difficulty in coming to hold management posts in parties or other political organizations. Their leadership roles soon trickle away into the backward-looking anonymity at which women’s up-bringing aims. Whilst the feminist movement in western countries has accumulated a number of political triumphs over the course of its activities, Ivorian women are faced with greater responsibilities under much less favourable conditions. Women are still seen as the weaker sex and relegated to background roles. Inequalities are visible and cause women to lead lives untouched by development. Since 1945, the United Nations Organization has advocated the promotion of women. The Ivory Coast, being affiliated to the various international programmes aimed at this has stated its wish to favour full development of women.

Nonetheless, in the present-day Ivory Coast there is still discrimination which puts a brake on their participation in politics. As Fassler (2004:1) states, they have fewer resources and opportunities than men to develop their political capacities.

By way of exemplification, of the 197 communes in the country, in 2009 only nine had a woman at their head. Of 56 departments and districts, just one department had a woman leader. In 2013, out of the 255 deputies in the country’s Parliament, only twenty-five were women. The Commission for Economic and Financial Affairs of the Parliament was made up of forty men and two women. The Commission for General and Institutional Affairs had thirty-nine men and two women. The Commission for Foreign Affairs had a proportion of thirty-nine men to six women.

This disparity was also visible in the exercise of executive power, with only five women out of a total of thirty-two ministers. This puts the country in fifty-fourth place according to a United Nations report of 2014. Women, despite constituting more or less half of the population, are not well represented in decision-making spheres. Those few who
are visible on the political scene face difficulties in ensuring any leadership role. For this reason they have organized within the RFGLCI to share experiences of government and reinforce female political leadership.

4. Women and Progress: Shea Butter Production Driving Development among the Women of the North

Mungo Park† is quite often forgotten in ethnographic descriptions of African societies. Nonetheless, he was one of the few explorers to render tribute to the work done by women in what is now Mali between 1795 and 1797.

As in other regions, in the northern part of the Ivory Coast, women constitute an instrument for the physical reproduction of the group, for the formation of basic social relationships, and for agricultural production. They are hidden behind their fathers, brothers, or husbands. They take no part in managing political power or religion, of which *Poro*‡ is the main manifestation. They are subject to harassing social standards and to achieve some small measure of independence women often carry out agriculture-related activities in the economy, such as the production of shea butter or *karité*. Dama Fatou, aged 44, was the person who revealed the mysteries of the manufacture of shea butter, a vegetable fat obtained from a tree currently called by the scientific name *Vitellaria paradoxa*, although formerly named *Butyrospermum Parkii*§. It is a very useful tree, but requires much patience, as it does not begin to fruit until into its second decade of growth and reaches peak fruitfulness only after 50 years. In nature it grows fairly freely and yields around 15 kilos of fruit a year.

The manufacturing process starts with the harvesting of the fruit, which is put into trenches until the outer pulp is gone and the inner husks become visible. This takes some months. Thereafter the fruit is dried for two days and the nuts or kernels are taken out of the husks or shells very carefully so as not to damage them. After being dried, they are roasted in ovens, with their water content being reduced to around 10%. This operation is done at night. The following day, the still warm kernels are pounded continuously. This operation requires some 10,000 blows. The result is a lumpy, chocolate-coloured paste. This paste is heated for a few minutes to soften it, and then is once more pounded slowly. After this it is strained to separate the butter from the doughy paste, which is also kneaded or squeezed manually to extract the maximum possible amount, and immediately thereafter the butter is stirred constantly, with hot water being added from time to time. The resultant thick mass is taken up with a ladle and poured into warm water to remove impurities. A white layer forms on the surface. To obtain butter of better quality it is mixed and heated once again to drive off water through evaporation. Waste materials sink to the bottom of the pot and a light yellow material is obtained. This is allowed to solidify over one whole night in specially prepared gourds. The entire process is manual, so that, as they grow older, many of the women involved suffer from back pains caused by constant stooping and bending.

The time spent producing the butter averages thirteen hours and twenty-five minutes. Dama Fatou added a further comment, stating that what had been seen was the shortest phase, as her two sisters and herself needed nearly two tons of nuts to produce seventy-five kilos of shea butter, all of which had to be harvested. The production period takes up 136 days, thus requiring one out of every three days in the year (personal statement by Dama Fatou, aged 44, Korhogo).

This is hard labour, but offers insignificant profits, as one kilo currently costs 600 FCFA in the Ivory Coast. However, this is acceptable for Dama Fatou, since it allows her to help her husband pay for the education of their children. She recalled that throughout her life she had worked at this task alongside her mother. In contrast, she did not want her daughters to have to do such a heavy job. She herself was unlucky and could not attend school, so that she had no other way of making some money. She stated that she and her husband had five children, including two

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†Mungo Park (1771 to 1806) was a Scottish explorer and natural historian, known for his expedition to the River Niger in Africa, where he died.

‡ *Poro*, apart from being an initiation ceremony to mark the attainment of manhood, is a semi-secret religious system prevalent in society, despite the presence of the Moslem religion. Its rigid code is still imposed, surviving into modern times. It is the essence of the Senoufo or Senufo, a people occupying the area of Korhogo and some nearby towns.

§ This name honoured Mungo Park, who was the first European botanist to see the tree in Mali.
girls, with the two eldest children in school. The money obtained by Dama Fatou from her work was used, she said, to ensure that her children got good training, hence she was willing to make this effort for them (personal statement by Dama Fatou).

Women’s role in development is increasingly becoming recognized. This means that improving women’s working conditions is one of the most effective investments that a country can make.

Aware of this, the Ivory Coast government has backed shea butter to provide a potential for development for women in the north of the country. With this in mind, from 24 to 26 March 2014 the Ivory Coast organized the Seventh World Conference on shea butter. When opening this conference, the Ivorian Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Sangafowa, stated that his government supported this sector, as it affected more than 12,000 women nut harvesters, belonging to nearly 850 associations located in five administrative regions in the north and centre of the country. He further remarked that it constituted an appreciable source of income for women, contributing to some extent to the reduction of poverty in the zones where production took place. The Ivory Coast, with an annual output of 40,000 tonnes, is the fifth largest producer in the world.

5. Baoulé Women Servants: Their Development Actions at Paquinou Time

The Baoulé country is bounded on the north by the savannah region (Korhogo) and on the east by the regions of Zanzan (capital Bondoukou) and Indenié (capital Abengourou). On its western edge there is Worodougou (capital Séguela) and the region of Gôh (capital Gagnoa) and to its south the district of Abidjan. The country is as extensive as Togo and every year is the scene of great excitement at the end of Easter week. The festival of Christ’s resurrection has a particular impact in this zone. It is known as Paquinou (Eastertide) and causes tremendous activity. Bernadette Akissi (2008: 69) argues that this festivity has led to the forming of an awareness of belonging to a group whose roots go back to ancestral times. Paquinou is a symbol of unity for the Baoulé.

Kouamé Brou is of Baoulé extraction and works as a Customs officer. When interviewed, he was preparing for Paquinou. He stated that the majority of towns in the area had formed development associations. Each year, priorities were defined by these and an audit was made of what had and had not been achieved. To this end, all of the town inhabitants, both men and women, were expected to come and hear in a public meeting about what had been done over the year (personal statement by Kouamé Brou 40 to 45 years of age, Angoda, Toumodi Department).

It is also noted by Konan Bertin (2013: 75) that Paquinou is an occasion for coming to agreements and taking consensual decisions about the development of a town in response to the challenges of modernity. Stephane Kouassi, an electrician who was clearly very accustomed to going to Paquinou ceremonies, remarked that he planned to return to Bocanda. He had been working as an electrician in Abidjan for some twenty years. As he saw it, Paquinou had allowed his town to have a hospital and a primary school. It linked utility to pleasure in the form of dances and parties. It was their way of thanking everybody for contributions to the development of the town (personal statement by Stephane Kouassi, 40 to 45 years of age, Bocanda)

Within this general movement, women’s participation was of interest for the purposes of this paper, and specifically that of women servants as agents of development. To investigate this, Monique and Josiane, two friends from Abè, a town in the centre of the country were observed. They worked in Cocody, a rich suburb of Abidjan. Research with them started some months before the festivities of Paquinou began. When they decided to return to their home town during the festival, the researcher accepted an invitation accompany them and a mutual friend who also originated in that town. Monique completed the first five years of primary school at an establishment some four kilometres from her village, while her colleague had never even been to school. As in this latter case, a lack of education for women obliges many Baoulé girls to take work as servants**. Baoulé women are conscious of a need to be financially

** According to data from the general census of the population taken in 1998, the valley of the River Bandama and the lake-land zone, the heartlands of the Baoulé, have very high levels of illiteracy (71.4% and 71.5%). However, it is the northern regions that are worst hit by this problem, with a rate as high as 90% in the case of Worodougou (Séguela) and 88.8% in the savannah region (Korhogo). With regard to school drop-out levels, girls are most affected, mostly between eleven and fourteen years of age, the onset of puberty when unwanted pregnancies or forced marriages take
independent if they are to have a more active role in society. On arriving at the town, Monique went to greet relatives and stated that formerly, while living in the town, she had not normally paid her contribution to the association, as she barely had enough for mere survival. Now she was easily able to pay it from her earnings. In doing so, she felt she was contributing to strengthening the association, which thereafter would undertake actions to develop the town. So, as she saw it, she was working not just for herself and her parents, but also for the good of her town (personal statement by Monique, 22 years of age, servant, Abè).

In Abè, the town has actually moved to a different site, with new houses, a school, and recently also running water. For the people of the town, everything stops to make way for Paquinou each year. Housemaids†† are not left out of the affair and some of them may even put their employment at risk for it. Josiane said that she was not worried if she lost her job because her employers did not want her to go, as she could find other work when she returned. After all, as she saw it, part of the reason she was working was to have the resources to take part in the holiday (personal statement from Josiane, 24 years of age, servant, Abè).

Veccho, a member of the teaching staff of the University of Cocody saw this as one of the drawbacks of the festival. He said that maids seemed to work just in preparation for Paquinou. Employers might find really hard-working servants, but when this period arrived would become nervous because they could not tell whether or not they would return from their journey. As it was difficult to get good maids, employers could only pray that they would return safe and sound and without problems. If they became pregnant or fell in love‡‡ they might never come back, which was part of the tyranny of servants (personal statement from Veccho, 38 to 42 years of age, teacher, Abidjan).

The upper middle and upper classes note this more because they are accustomed to rely on servants. Veccho stated that his wife had had to request leave and look after their children because he had a heavy teaching load and could not help in the task. This had led them to realize that servants’ work is not easy because the effort required is hard (personal statement from Veccho).

The conflicts of interest are real, but for the servants the purpose of working is to achieve personal and group development, and a specific employment can be sacrificed for this. It is not difficult to understand this, especially in the case of somebody like Josiane who has everything she values in her home town, since her husband and children are there. She stated that when she went to the town, it was not just for the festivities. Her employers did not understand it, as they looked only to their own interests, but she had her children and husband in the town, and took advantage of the period to be with them. Having spent the whole year far away, she felt it was her time to share what she had earned with her work. On this occasion, the money she had saved had allowed her to bring some machetes for her husband’s farm, clothes, crockery and items for the kitchen. She had also been able to buy some books that her children would use in the coming year. If she did not go home for the festival, she would miss many things. She added that she also had some of her own clothing that she would leave behind for use when she returned for good (personal statement from Josiane).

The role of Baoulé women is like that of Philippine women. These began to arrive in Spain in the 1960s with the aim of working in domestic service as live-in maids in high-income households. In this way, they could live at the least expense and send the greatest amount of money back to their families in the Philippines, as pointed out by Pe-Pua (2005: 55).

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†† They are known by the French word “bonnes” in local speech.

‡‡ This statement recalls a phrase from the Baoulé singer N’guess Bon Sens, famous for encouraging people to attend Paquinou. He told women that if they had no husband they should come to their home town at Paquinou as they would be sure to find one. Love affairs are very usual at this time. However, this relaxation of standards can have negative consequences, such as sexually transmitted diseases. Moreover, during the ethnographic field work reports were heard of cases of adultery or incest in the town.
6. Ivorian servants leaving their small towns and villages to go to the big city, and Philippine women leaving their country to take work abroad show the same situation shaped by the idea that they can and should contribute with their work to helping their families. Taking a more prominent role than they have been accustomed to have in the past is just one step forward in the universal process of increasing the appreciation of women’s value.

6. Conclusion.

In the Ivory Coast, albeit slowly, women are winning the battle for political representation and can hope to achieve a balanced relationship between men and women. Reliance on women’s dynamism is an essential condition for general development. The research being reported here made it possible to see that the economic potential of women in the north and centre of the country makes them into agents for development who should now more than ever be taken into account. Indeed, former president Henri Konan Bédié stated that it was necessary to recognize the determinant role of women in the process of development by increasing their participation in the drawing-up of action plans and putting them into operation. He felt that more resources should be put at their disposal, so as to allow them to carry out their projects and to achieve personal development (Henri Konan Bedié, Programmatic speech delivered at Yamoussoukro in 1995).

References