

Krou

Profile

A language cluster encompassing ethnic groups in south-west Côte d'Ivoire and south-eastern Liberia, Krou are organized in segmentary lineages. The cluster includes the Bété, Dida, Wobe, Grebo and a people simply called Krou. More generally Krou is a term applied by Europeans to the coast between Monrovia and Grand Lahou and the coast population who served for many generations as sailors on European ships.

Bété number approximately 410,000. They are concentrated in some 800 villages in the triangle among the cities of Daloa, Soubre and Gagnoa.

Dida (195,000) are a people of the Krou ethnic cluster, concentrated in south-central Côte d'Ivoire, self-identified by an exclusive network of political and economic relations. Traditionally Dida society is very decentralized, although each village recognizes one lineage as proprietor of village lands. Culturally they are influenced by Baoulé to the north.

Guéré or Wè (318,000) are Krou people traditionally residing in west-central Côte d'Ivoire. Guéré is a designation developed by a colonial administrator for the people living south of the Dan. Female initiation societies have been maintained, and age grades of both sexes are still prominent. A cultural trait is the presence of women chiefs. Guéré society is characterized by weak political authority beyond the lineage or village, with spiritual leadership having a separate role. Until recently Guéré were exclusively subsistence farmers; cash cropping has brought rapid social and economic changes and many Guéré have migrated.

Historical context

Once inhabiting large areas to the north and east of Côte d'Ivoire, about 200 years ago, Krou groups were pushed to the sea by Manding and Akan movements south and west. The Krou resisted the slave trade and actively fought traders seeking to enslave their kin.

The Bété migrated to the area in the 17th century. Later, they actively resisted French control. They did not enter into regional commercial exchange until the end of the nineteenth century, their last resistance against colonial rule taking place in 1906. Dida resisted colonial rule during 1909-1918 and did not engage in cash crop production until after the World War II. During the colonial period, Bété hunting and martial activities were replaced by coffee and cocoa farming and constituted one of the largest groups of plantation workers in the colony, along with substantial immigration of Dioulas, Voltaics and Baoulés that has continued up to the present. At the same time many Bété moved to the coast, especially to Abidjan. Thus the population of the traditional Bété region is now composed of equal numbers of Bété and migrants.

An ethnic movement started in the 1930s among the Bété in an attempt to represent the interests of a

region and a people who felt a special discrimination under the colonial system. The period since independence has heightened Bété self-awareness. This name was not used before the colonial era but originated as a designation for those people working on the plantations of south-east Côte d'Ivoire. Since the colonial era, outsiders - both European and African - have held pejorative stereotypes of the Bété. Under President Houphouët-Boigny from 1960-1993, the government encouraged people from the dominant Baoulé group and others from around the country to settle in the far west in order to dilute Bété dominance there and profit from the cocoa and coffee plantations there. Bété identity is now influenced by these indigenous/outsider, rural/urban contrasts rather than by pre-colonial factors.

The Bété home region has been the site of periodic upheavals, including a harshly suppressed rebellion in 1970 in Gagnoa. Kragbe Nragbe, a Bété student who attempted to found an opposition party, the PANA, in 1967, tried to mobilize resistance to participation in one-party elections. Nragbe led a march of several hundred from different Bété villages to Gagnoa where they pronounced the republic of 'Eburnea' which was meant to group the various Krou ethnic peoples in the west. The gendarmerie and army were sent in from village to village making hundreds of arrests. Those arrested were held until 1976 when most were set free. Nragbe was mortally wounded by soldiers. Laurent Gbagbo, a Bété and the current president of Côte d'Ivoire, was a fierce opponent of then-President Houphouët-Boigny, and was jailed from March 1971 to January 1973.

When Gbagbo founded the Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI) in exile in 1982, it received the strong backing among the Bété, Dida and Guéré. The FPI was founded in defensiveness over the incursions of outsiders into their homelands, which were also the richest agricultural lands in Côte d'Ivoire, and a major source of its revenue. The party was also nurtured by resentment over years of economic and political exclusion. Perhaps not surprisingly, the FPI took on ultranationalist and xenophobic overtones from the start. In the west, the notion of 'Ivoirité' came to mean not just the exclusion of northerners from national politics, but also the reclamation of indigenous lands.

As Côte d'Ivoire fell into civil war in 2002, Krou groups that back the FPI took the opportunity to rid the region of perceived 'outsiders'. This particularly led to tension between Guéré and Dioula because members of the latter group had been settled in the west during colonial times.

Current issues

An outbreak of ethnic violence in Duékoué in June 2005 killed at least 15 people and caused 10,000 others to flee. In its wake, President Gbagbo replaced local civilian leaders with military figures and established a special military unit to intervene in the area. Both moves were popular with his supporters but further heightened ethnic distrust.