

Voltaic peoples (Senoufo, Lobi)

Profile

Senoufo, the largest Voltaic ethnic group, are people of Bambara origin who live in north-central Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Burkina Faso. Senoufo villages are completely independent of one another. A Senoufo secret society plays a major role in three periods of the first thirty years of man's life. After this, men are no longer obliged to perform agricultural work. Each Senoufo village has a sacred forest in which ritual activities are carried out. Groups of Dioula live in enclaves in many Senoufo villages.

Lobi, who number about 156,000 are a Voltaic group without village organization or chiefs, based on matrilineal lineage. They are among the poorest populations in Côte d'Ivoire.

Historical context

Dioula migrants moving south and into northern Côte d'Ivoire in the 1600s dubbed the population of maize and millet farmers they found there 'Senoufo', or 'those who speak Senari'. They introduced Islam to Senoufo chiefs, and it spread rapidly throughout Senoufo society.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century Lobi moved north-west and east because of population pressure and incursions. The consequence was a massive emigration and the non-violent occupation of new land. The immigrants mixed with present occupants, and Lobi - traditional hunters and warriors - were welcomed by the kingdom of Bouna. They remained isolated from Dioula and were never conquered by Manding, or British or French colonization, although they were nominally 'pacified' by 1901. Lobi migration continued in the colonial period from Upper Volta and Ghana to the sparsely populated Kulango areas and extreme north-east around Bouna.

In the colonial and post-colonial periods, Voltaic peoples were among the northern groups excluded from power. In the early 1990s, the ruling PDCI party raised the spectre of religious extremism and conflict if Muslims were granted a share of power. The economic decline that began in the 1980s and continued in the 1990s heightened ethnic tensions.

Upon seizing power in 1995, Robert Guéï introduced the notion of 'Ivoirité', ostensibly to exclude non-Ivoirians from the political process. In practice this substantially sharpened public sentiment among the majority against northerners, including including Voltaic peoples, regardless of the length of individual or family tenure in Cote d'Ivoire.

When the country fractured in 2002, Senoufo clearly came down on the side of the northern rebels, first in the MPC, and later in the New Forces. New Forces leader and current Prime Minister Guillaume Soro is a Senoufo, albeit one who practices Catholicism and not Islam.

Current issues

Despite the tenuous north-south peace process, northern peoples, including Voltaic peoples who live in the

south, remain prone to violence from the government and pro-Gbagbo militant groups.