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**Publication Date**

2011-04-18

# Of saviours, gods and domination

## The rise and fall of Laurent Gbagbo

By Véronique Tadjo\*

The history of Côte d'Ivoire is marked internally by successive ethnic dominations. In 1960, following the end of colonisation by France, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who spearheaded independence, further established his political influence by claiming royal legitimacy. He was a member of the Baoulé aristocracy. The Baoulé are part of the larger Akan group who are descendants from the Ashanti kingdom situated in what is today Ghana.

To maintain his power over the many other fragmented groups of people who had established themselves on Ivorian territory over centuries of migrations, Houphouët-Boigny promoted the idea that the Baoulé were the authentic people of Côte d'Ivoire. During his regime, lasting 35 years, he did not hesitate to call on Akan mythology to legitimise his hold on the country. The legend of Queen Pokou (which I recount in my book *Queen Pokou, concerto for a sacrifice*) comes from the corpus of Akan oral tradition. It is part myth, part historical fact. According to the legend, in the 18th century, Pokou and her partisans had to flee Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti kingdom, after a war of succession. Pursued by the royal army, they entered the forest. At some point in their flight, a wide and tumultuous river stopped their advance. In order to save her people, Pokou had to sacrifice her only child by throwing him in the waters. Suddenly, the river parted and the people were able to cross safely to the other side. Behind them, the waters closed again. Pokou was declared queen and she founded the Baoulé kingdom. In my book, I question the validity of Pokou's sacrifice and remind readers that the legend contains a powerful message: we are all migrants.

Although the legend belongs to one particular group of people, under Houphouët-Boigny it became part of the collective imagination and acquired the status of a national myth that portrayed the Baoulé people as the true custodians of Ivorian identity.

Houphouët-Boigny relied heavily on the immigrant labour force from neighbouring countries to help develop Côte d'Ivoire, offering them all sorts of economic incentives, including land. Until 1990, they did not need a residence permit and they enjoyed the right to vote. At his death in 1993, his successor, Henri Konan Bédié came to power and sought to further strengthen the Baoulé ethnic identity to which he also belonged. But he chose to disenfranchise those who were perceived to be non-natives. He bolstered this move by promoting the concept of Ivoirité, which can be loosely translated as Ivorianness. It is a concept that implicitly asks the question: who is an Ivorian and who is not? Who are the real Ivorians? This provided a way of defining and securing one's national legitimacy through the stigmatisation of 'foreigners'. It became the basis for affirming the right of the self to belong to the nation while alienating and excluding others.

Economically, Bédié's regime was characterized by financial scandals and a lack of accountability. Politically, the government prevented opposition leader Alassane Ouattara from contesting presidential elections, on the grounds that his family originally came from Burkina Faso and that he had presented himself as a Burkinabe citizen early in his career at an international organisation. Ouattara, it should also be noted, had previously served as prime minister under Houphouët-Boigny from 1990 to 1993. Many Muslims who come from the northern part of Côte d'Ivoire, and who had family ties across the border with Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea, saw this as a sign of their political marginalisation. The tension between the northern and southern regions of Côte d'Ivoire grew deeper and deeper until it reached boiling point. In 2002, civil war broke out when a rebel group, headed by Soro Guillaume (Ouattara's current prime minister) took over the north of the country, precipitating a division that is at the heart of the political crisis in Côte d'Ivoire.

When he was elected as president in 2000, Laurent Gbagbo, although from a different ethnic group, continued to use the concept of Ivoirité for his own political aims. But being a Bété, he put aside the Baoulé's claim to ancient legitimacy and retained the component that strengthened the exclusion of northerners, since Alassane Ouattara was already his main rival in the fight for power.

Gbagbo also gave a new spin to the concept of Ivoirité by infusing it with a religious dimension. Because he couldn't claim any royal lineage, he used religious rhetoric to enhance his political persona. Although a Catholic, he switched to the Evangelical

Church which in its structure, theology, and forms of worship, provided him with powerful imagery and boundless narratives from the Scriptures. The Old Testament, for example, has particular resonance with oral traditions. Gbagbo and his very influential wife, Simone, also a staunch believer surrounded themselves with pastors whom they consulted at length on key political decisions. The power of an all-possessive Christian God became a force they believed would help Gbagbo in his fight against what was perceived as a Muslim threat coming from the North. Yet he also sought the advice of Marabouts (Muslim priests) and witchdoctors from animist religion.

Gbagbo earned the nickname of “Le Christ de Mama” (the Christ of Mama), Mama being the name of his birth place in the Western part of the country. Internationally, he had supporters in the Christian Right in the United States. Meanwhile, as the political and military crisis worsened, the southern part of the country was immersed in religious fervour.

After the second round of the long-awaited presidential elections of November 2010 which were meant to put an end to Côte d’Ivoire’s crisis, Gbagbo refused to step down and accept the victory of Alassane Ouattara, the internationally recognised president. The stand-off lasted more than four months during which the country was plunged into a fierce conflict that led to an estimated 3,000 dead and uprooted a million people. The belief that God was leading his fight, and that he would ultimately be vindicated, must have played a big part in Gbagbo’s determination to resist at all costs, even though he had stayed in power for a whole decade.

On 11 April, he was finally arrested by Ouattara’s soldiers after UN and French troops launched repeated helicopter attacks on his residence. He had been holed up for several days with more than a hundred members of his entourage inside a basement.

Now Ouattara is at last in charge of the country. But, we must remember that with or against Bédié and Gbagbo, he has dominated the political landscape of Côte d’Ivoire for nearly twenty years. Considering that the country is badly in need of real change, will he be able to deliver?

He faces the momentous task of bringing back security, and kick-starting the economy. Indeed, the challenges that await him are numerous. Ensuring that Côte d'Ivoire becomes a true secular state is certainly one of them and avoiding any form of new ethnic domination is another one. There must not be any victor's mentality, no "us" versus "them" and a witch-hunt must not be carried out against the Bété minority. What happens to Gbagbo and his former government is of prime importance, of course. After the humiliating images of his capture went round the world, it is necessary to show more respect to a former Head of state who gained 46% of the votes in the presidential run-off against Ouattara. Moreover, in order to put an end to impunity, gross human rights violations like the massacres that took place in Duékoué must be thoroughly investigated. This has to happen on all sides including Ouattara's own troops.

In this sense, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that is being set up is a step in the right direction. However the issue of granting amnesty or not for the perpetrators will be intensely debated and is potentially divisive. Ironically, this important tool in the process of healing wounds, bringing justice and forgiveness has a strong Christian connotation.

After the traumatic past months, many Ivorians are faced with a dilemma: on the one hand they want normality to come back quickly so they can go on with their lives and on the other hand, they are afraid of giving "carte blanche" to the new political team. Millions of euros and dollars are pouring in from Western donors in an effort to instigate a kind of "Marshal Plan" for reconstruction. More funds are expected. The new authorities will have to show genuine transparency and accountability if trust in politicians is to be regained. Moreover, finding constitutional ways of decentralising power by allowing it not to be concentrated solely in the hands of the presidential executive should be on the table. Civil society will also have to find a greater voice.

There is no saviour, Ivorians are fully aware of it. If Côte d'Ivoire is to gain lasting stability and development, it will come from within the country as a whole.

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