VITI Fabio. — *La Côte d'Ivoire et ses étrangers.*

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REFERENCES

VITI Fabio. — *La Côte d'Ivoire et ses étrangers*. Paris, L'Harmattan, 2016, 267 p., bibl.

- 1 The status of strangers in Côte d'Ivoire has been a politically divisive and sometimes deadly issue, especially since the death of Félix Houphouët-Boigny and the advent of multi-party elections. Indeed, as Viti perceptively notes in his introduction to the volume, the question of who constitutes a “stranger” is by no means self-evident, and can vary from context to context. The book is a collection of essays on the subject of strangers in Côte d'Ivoire, all written by Ivoirian scholars (except for Viti, the editor of the volume), but from a variety of disciplinary perspectives including political science, sociology, communications, anthropology and geography. These different disciplinary perspectives sometimes intersect in very suggestive ways, although the focus sometimes diverges in ways that do not necessarily lead to a synthesis of the topic, and sometimes leave aspects of the problem partly or even completely absent.
- 2 The first two papers by Babo and Zina focus on the political dimensions of stranger status and of drastic changes in policy from one administration to another. Both point out the ways in which the stage was set by Houphouët's radically inclusive policy, both in allowing African (though not European) strangers to vote and in granting rights to land to those who were using it profitably, overriding collective rights of autochthonous communities. As Babo convincingly argues, this issue of rights to land has been critical, especially though not exclusively in the southwest. In particular, he points out contradictions and ironies in Henri Konan Bédié's ideology of *ivoirité*. In the southwest, where both Baoule and foreign (Malian and Burkinabe) outsiders asserted rights over land, the definition of “strangerhood” in exclusively national terms excluded the foreigners but not Bédié's own fellow Baoule. The implications of the

different ways in which strangers are defined, in national or ethnic terms (among others), is a central theme of many of the essays in the book. Zina shows how the advent of multi-party politics has made the question of strangers politically critical, defining as it does who can and who cannot vote.

- 3 The next two papers are about strangers in the collective imaginary. Ibo analyzes the socio-historical reasons why Burkinabe are the paradigmatic stranger/foreigners in Côte d'Ivoire and Mossi the prototypical Burkinabe, in terms of the legacy of colonial and postcolonial governments in recruiting (initially forcibly) migrant labor on Ivoirian plantations in the forest. In a provocative essay, Bahi examines stereotypes of foreigners in popular media, especially comedy sketches on television where foreigners are stereotypically depicted as buffoons. He argues that such images reinforce prejudices and Ivoirian sentiments of cultural, moral and intellectual superiority, while cautioning that such images are not necessarily consumed uncritically by the viewing public.
- 4 Gadou and Viti's papers discuss the image of the stranger in different local cultures, Dida and Baoule respectively. Both anthropologists adopt the perspective of the village, where strangers include all outsiders, including some who share language and ethnicity. Indeed, among the Baoule, newborn babies are initially classed as "strangers" for the first few years of their lives. They demonstrate how the incorporation of strangers into the village has always been contextual and contingent; assimilation is never definitively complete. They both point out the ways in which the modern movement of peoples has fundamentally changed the importance and operation of strangerhood, without quite bridging the gulf between an older—one hesitates to say "traditional"—village perspective and the contemporary place of strangers in the modern political economy.
- 5 Kouassi and Kouame's paper discusses the bureaucratic process of securing land rights in an Agni village from the standpoint of the Comité villageois de gestion foncière rurale, a committee which strikingly includes a majority of strangers, some from outside the country (notably Burkina Faso), others from different parts of the country, Baoule and Yacouba, for example. The depiction of the process suggests that an initiative that ostensibly clarifies the situation of locals and strangers in terms of rights over land instead makes it even more complex and ambiguous; the procurement of such a document is by no means a foregone conclusion, nor is anyone really sure what it means and what rights it ultimately confers. Finally, Serhan's paper focuses on a very different category of stranger, the Lebanese, and their shift from Lebanese—in Côte d'Ivoire to Lebanese from Côte d'Ivoire. The Lebanese constitute a particularly interesting case because their status remains fundamentally ambiguous. They speak local languages fluently, and increasingly intermarry with Africans (although men much more so than women). Even though—at least for the time being—their status is not politically sensitive, their situation remains fundamentally ambiguous in many respects.
- 6 The various essays in the book waver between an emphasis on culture, on the ways in which different Ivoirians categorize "strangers," indeed what such a notion might imply for Dida or Baoule (for example); and political economy, notably the importance of struggles over land rights and its impact on local and national politics. Additionally, because of the way the volume is comprised of individual contributions with very different empirical and conceptual foci, there is a glaring omission. There is little if any

mention of the historical and contemporary Mande networks. This is critical for several reasons. Historically, trade networks involved the large-scale settlement of Mande speakers as strangers in the midst of ethnically and linguistically different populations. The status of stranger governed relationships not only between Mande and non-Mande, but between short- and long-term Mande “guests.” In contemporary Côte d’Ivoire, Mande straddle international borders, such that, for purposes of nationality, their status as “foreigners” is not self-evident. In the wake of the failed coup in 2002, the political division of the country into north and south was hardly unrelated to this ambivalent status of Mande as virtual strangers. Throughout the book, Burkinabe, especially Mossi, are depicted as the typical foreigners, whereas the status of Dyula—admittedly a term with shifting meanings—is left relatively unproblematized. Even so, the book’s multi-faceted approach to the study of a topic as politically sensitive and urgent as the status of strangers in Côte d’Ivoire is very welcome indeed. This is an important contribution to a topic which is of central interest to all who study contemporary Côte d’Ivoire.