

BOOK REVIEW

Konstanze N'Guessan. *Histories of Independence in Côte d'Ivoire: An Ethnography of the Past*. Leiden: Brill, 2020. xii + 277 pp. Acknowledgements. Bibliography. Index. \$85.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-9004227583.

In 2010, Côte d'Ivoire, struggling to emerge as a united nation after nearly a decade of civil strife, celebrated fifty years of independence. In *Histories of Independence in Côte d'Ivoire: An Ethnography of the Past*, Konstanze N'Guessan explores how Ivorians of different stripes debated independence as a “*lieu de mémoire*”—a complex site of memory-making—before and at that critical juncture (3-4). N'Guessan positions herself as an anthropologist with interests in “mnemohistory,” or how individuals remember, rationalize, and politicize memory (11). Over seven chapters, an analytical introduction, and a conclusion, N'Guessan argues for a “multi-voiced and multi-volume” account of Ivorian independence that highlights both the contested nature of decolonization and the ongoing impact of these variegated historical representations on Ivorian politics.

N'Guessan orients her first chapter as an account of Ivorian Independence Day celebrations “along the grain,” following Ann Stoler. She focuses specifically on the *fêtes tournantes* of the 1960s and 70s under the government of long-time president Félix Houphouët-Boigny. N'Guessan suggests that Houphouët-Boigny and his party, the PDCI-RDA, used these festivities to project a confident vision of the future rather than to critically reflect on the (colonial) past. Skipping ahead two decades, the next chapter examines the politics of Laurent Gbagbo, Houphouët-Boigny's critic and eventual successor. Centering on Gbagbo's *fête de la liberté* commemorating the advent of multi-party elections in 1990, N'Guessan probes Ivorian history “against the grain” to depict how politicians drew on the rhetoric of decolonization to advance conflicting agendas.

Shifting gears, the third and fourth chapters address the development of Ivorian academic historiography and the “official memory” of independence. Chapter Three will be of particular interest to historians of the discipline, as it contrasts the postcolonial Ivorian academy with its more famous siblings in Dar es Salaam, Ibadan, and Dakar. N'Guessan contends that Ivorian historiography, unlike other postcolonial African intellectual traditions, did not

actively seek to create a “usable past” because Houphouët-Boigny’s PDCI-RDA chose instead to seek a “peaceful transition” to independence from France (5, 89). The fourth chapter analyzes Henriette Diabaté’s groundbreaking work on the Ivorian women’s march and Houphouët-Boigny’s testimony at the colloquium on the fortieth anniversary of the PDCI-RDA to investigate the creation of official narratives of decolonization.

The final three chapters showcase N’Guessan’s fieldwork during the *cinquantenaire*—the fiftieth anniversary of independence—in four southern Ivorian cities. Chapter Five details the conference series commemorating the *cinquantenaire* and how Gbagbo rhetorically linked his efforts contra neo-colonialism to the anti-colonial movement of the 1940s and 50s. The sixth chapter reads against these representations, investigating “alternative performances of nostalgia and spiritual liberation” (172), particularly among Ivorian evangelicals. Chapter Seven contains N’Guessan’s perhaps most innovative ideas, examining evangelical Christians’ interpretations of Côte d’Ivoire as “God’s chosen nation.” This chapter analyzes a set of group interviews with young Ivorian men that hint at diverse grassroots memories and interpretations of independence.

N’Guessan’s work is a valuable contribution to a burgeoning literature on Ivorian history and politics that raises important questions about decolonization’s afterlives. Her emphasis on the deep ties between evangelical Christianity and popular political imaginaries in her final chapters is particularly promising. The book would have been enriched, nonetheless, by including the perspectives of Muslim Ivorians, a group that is scapegoated by Ivorian nationalism and frequently ignored by historiography. This inclusion would have afforded the author latitude to engage with the relevant literature on *ivoirité*—a local iteration of ethno-nationalism in vogue circa 2010—and its intersections with narratives of independence.

This book prods anthropologists and historians to engage in interdisciplinary conversations about memory. Some of N’Guessan’s pointed critiques of the historical discipline are already well established. Few professional historians today claim to write history “as it actually happened,” à la Ranke (16). Indeed, N’Guessan’s idea of an “ethnography of the past” as a “history of the manifold” will seem quite familiar to most historians (11–12). There is also room for additional archival work to complement N’Guessan’s findings. The book’s first two chapters, for instance, rely perhaps too heavily on coverage by the Ivorian government periodical *Fraternité*. In contrast, the interviews in later chapters offer nuanced, even unexplored, accounts of political memory in Francophone Africa. Future research could further explore how high-level political interpretations of independence have been received and appropriated by “ordinary” Ivorians.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2021.138

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