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The History of Côte d'Ivoire

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Introduction

L'histoire de la Côte d'Ivoire est le récit d'une terre en constante évolution, marquée par la diversité de ses peuples et la richesse de ses traditions. S'étendant du littoral atlantique aux savanes du nord, le territoire ivoirien a vu s'épanouir de nombreuses communautés, chacune ayant contribué au tissu culturel et historique du pays. Bien avant l'arrivée des Européens, ce sont les sociétés autochtones, telles que les Akan, les Kru, les Mandé et les Voltaïques, qui ont bâti les premiers royaumes et ont forgé les identités régionales qui persistent encore aujourd'hui.

Du néolithique aux grandes migrations, chacun de ces peuples a façonné la Côte d'Ivoire par ses savoir-faire, ses pratiques agricoles et ses réseaux de commerce. Ces royaumes et chefferies, dotés d'institutions politiques complexes et de riches traditions artistiques, entretenaient de vastes échanges, du commerce de l'or et des noix de kola au dialogue culturel et religieux. Le dynamisme de la Côte d'Ivoire précoloniale démontre que l'histoire ivoirienne est bien antérieure à la période coloniale, portant la marque d'influences internes et régionales déterminantes.

L'arrivée des Européens à la fin du XVe siècle marque une nouvelle ère, faite d'enjeux commerciaux, d'alliances et de confrontations. Les côtes difficiles d'accès et la résistance des populations locales ralentiront la colonisation, mais le XIXe siècle voit la France affirmer progressivement sa domination. La période coloniale transforme profondément la société ivoirienne : instauration du travail forcé, remodelage des structures politiques traditionnelles, essor de l'agriculture de rente et introduction d'éléments nouveaux comme l'éducation occidentale et le christianisme. Ces mutations engendrent frustration, souffrances, mais aussi prise de conscience politique et élan vers l'indépendance.

L'accession à la souveraineté, en 1960, ouvre une nouvelle étape dominée par la figure de Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Son gouvernement pragmatique et son engagement pour la paix conduisent à la période du « miracle ivoirien », avec une croissance économique rapide, une urbanisation intense et une stabilité politique relative. Mais la Côte d'Ivoire n'échappe pas aux inégalités, à la dépendance vis-à-vis des cultures d'exportation, ni aux tensions sociales et politiques qui minent progressivement l'unité nationale.

Les décennies suivantes sont marquées par des crises profondes : l'effondrement de l'économie, l'instrumentalisation de la notion d'« ivoirité », la montée des divisions identitaires et, finalement, la guerre civile et la crise postélectorale de 2010-2011. Pendant cette période troublée, la société ivoirienne montre à la fois sa vulnérabilité et sa résilience.

Aujourd'hui, la Côte d'Ivoire, tournée vers la réconciliation et la modernisation, est à un carrefour. Son histoire, faite de défis, d'adaptations et de renaissances, sert de fondement à sa quête actuelle d'un avenir de paix, de démocratie et de prospérité partagée. Ce livre propose un voyage à travers les siècles pour mieux comprendre les forces et les lignes de fracture qui ont façonné ce grand pays d'Afrique de l'Ouest.

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Chapter One: The Land and Peoples: Geography and Early Human Settlement

Côte d'Ivoire, often known as Ivory Coast, is a West African nation situated along the Gulf of Guinea, truly a land of vibrant contrasts and profound history. Its geographic makeup provides a picturesque journey from its southern coastal lowlands, boasting beautiful beaches and a network of lagoons, to a smooth forest plateau in the central regions, eventually giving way to the undulating savannas of the north. This diverse landscape has played a crucial role in shaping the country's climate, ecosystems, and the very distribution of its peoples throughout history.

The country is roughly square in shape, bordering Ghana to the east, Mali and Burkina Faso to the north, and Liberia and Guinea to the west. This strategic location has historically positioned Côte d'Ivoire as a crossroads, facilitating both trade and cultural exchange with its neighbors. The terrain generally rises gradually from sea level in the south to approximately 500 meters (1,600 feet) in the north, with the Guinea Highlands in the west reaching elevations of up to 1,500 meters (5,000 feet). The highest point is the majestic Mont Nimba, which soars to 1,752 meters (5,748 feet) above sea level in the far west, along the border with Guinea and Liberia.

Côte d'Ivoire experiences two primary climatic domains: a humid equatorial climate in the south and a tropical savanna climate in the north. Along the coast, temperatures remain fairly consistent, typically ranging between 25-35°C (77-95°F) throughout the year, accompanied by high humidity often exceeding 90%. This southern region enjoys two rainy seasons, primarily from May through July and a lesser one in October and November. Abidjan, the economic capital, receives around 75 inches (1,900 mm) of annual precipitation.

Moving northward, the climate transitions to a tropical savanna, characterized by distinct wet and dry seasons. Here, temperatures can range more widely, from 28° to 37°C (82-99°F), with annual rainfall averaging around 1,200 mm³. The dry season in the north, lasting from approximately November to March, is often influenced by the harmattan, a parching northeasterly wind. The single rainy season in this area generally occurs from April to October.

This climatic and topographic variation directly influences the country's vegetation zones. The south was once home to extensive tropical rainforests, though much of this has been reduced due to deforestation. Today, the southern third of the country is largely covered by tropical rainforest, while the north is characterized by savanna, with vast grasslands and scattered trees that extend towards the Sahel. A "forest-

savanna mosaic" interlaces these two primary zones in the central belt, creating a rich biodiversity.

Several major river systems crisscross Côte d'Ivoire, generally flowing from north to south and emptying into the Gulf of Guinea. The longest and most commercially important is the Bandama River, stretching approximately 800 kilometers (497 miles). It drains a significant portion of the central region, flowing through the artificial Lake Kossou, and is fed by major tributaries such as the Marahoué (also known as Bandama Rouge) and the Nzi. Other prominent rivers include the Cavally, Sassandra, and Comoé. These rivers, while largely untamed and navigable only for short distances inland, have historically been vital for transportation, agriculture, and providing hydroelectric power, such as from the Kossou Dam on the Bandama.

Beneath these varied landscapes lie significant natural resources that have shaped Côte d'Ivoire's economic trajectory. The country is globally renowned as the leading exporter of cocoa beans, a crop that thrives in its southern climes. Beyond agriculture, Côte d'Ivoire possesses untapped mineral wealth. Deposits of gold, diamonds, iron ore, bauxite, and manganese are present, with gold being the most exploited mineral. Offshore reserves of petroleum and natural gas have also been exploited since the mid-1990s, contributing significantly to export revenues.

The earliest chapters of human presence in Côte d'Ivoire are etched in the archaeological record, dating back to the Late Stone Age. Evidence suggests that hunter-gatherer societies were the first to inhabit the region. Recent groundbreaking discoveries in Anyama, near Abidjan, have pushed back the timeline even further, revealing stone tools from 150,000 years ago. These findings indicate that early *Homo sapiens* thrived in tropical forest environments far earlier than previously believed, demonstrating that the dense forests were not an insurmountable barrier to their spread.

By the first millennium AD, these nomadic groups began to give way to more settled agricultural communities. This shift marked a pivotal moment, leading to the gradual emergence of the diverse ethnic groups that form the vibrant tapestry of modern Ivorian society. Côte d'Ivoire is home to over 60 distinct ethnic groups, each contributing unique languages, traditions, and customs to the national identity.

Among the most prominent of these groups are the Akan, Kru, Mande, and Voltaic (also known as Gur) peoples. The Akan, comprising roughly 38% of the Ivorian population, are primarily found in the central region, with the Baoulé being a significant subgroup. The Kru people, known for their seafaring traditions, inhabit the southwest. Mande groups, including the Malinke and Dioula, are influential in the western and northwestern parts of the country, with the Dioula language being widely spoken across Côte d'Ivoire. The Voltaic or Gur peoples, such as the Senufo and Lobi, are concentrated in the northern regions.

These early inhabitants, through their interactions with the land and each other, laid the essential foundations for the future development of Côte d'Ivoire. Their choices in settlement, agriculture, and trade were deeply influenced by the varied geography, from the fertile southern forests to the northern savannas. The interplay between these diverse communities and their environment created a rich mosaic of cultures and economies, setting the stage for the complex historical narrative that was to unfold.

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