



Research Paper

## The Abouré Royalty; When A Customary Power Becomes A Player In Local Development In Bonoua (Southeastern Ivory Coast)

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### SUMMARY

Since the early years of independence, many Ivorian towns have witnessed the reduction or disappearance of traditional powers in favor of local authorities, considered to be the real players in development. This situation can be explained by the fact that customary powers and decentralized entities have divergent modes of organization and operation. However, some towns, such as Bonoua, have managed to maintain customary power, which continues to play a key role in the socio-economic development of this locality. The aim of this study is to understand the strategies and actions that make customary power in Bonoua a key player in the town's development, despite the presence of local authorities (Regional Council, Town Hall). To achieve this objective, the methodology was a combination of documentary exploration, observation and, above all, interviews with the various stakeholders. The main results show that the Abouré traditional power in this locality is a kind of customary monarchy, where power is hereditary through matrilineal lineage, but hierarchical. Its original mission was to ensure the social equilibrium of the people as guarantor of tradition. However, we note that this power, through the funds collected, manages to finance sectors such as education, health, culture etc., a mission that is devolved to the municipality.

**Key words:** Power customary, Abouré, development, Bonoua

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Considered by H. M. TUNGA-BAU (2010, p.21) as "the set of beliefs and practices that confer on an individual, a family or a clan the authority necessary to command a more or less homogeneous group of individuals and obtain obedience from them", traditional or customary power remains a fundamental basis of traditional African societies in general and Ivorian societies in particular. More influential during the pre-colonial and colonial eras, customary power gradually lost its authority after independence (N. KOUADIO, 2006, p.4). It is now controlled by the State, which confines it to the role of guarantor of the habits and customs of the communities to which it belongs. As a result, almost all local development actions and initiatives have been entrusted to decentralized or local authorities. Despite this state of affairs, certain customary authorities in Côte d'Ivoire, strengthened by the trust placed in them by the population, have played and continue to play a vital role in the development of localities or territories. The town of Bonoua, in the south-east of the country, is an "archetype" in that the Abouré customary authorities, thanks to their financial resources and influence, carry out development initiatives (building and refurbishing schools, organizing festivities, cleaning up the area, etc.). Through its actions, it has become an influential player in the development of Bonoua, just like the municipality. These situations have prompted this study, the main question of which is: How has customary power become a player in local development in Bonoua, when this mission is devolved in principle to local authorities (Regional Council, Town Hall)? This main question is better elucidated through the following questions: How is Abouré customary power organized in Bonoua? What is its role and missions? What development initiatives can Abouré customary authorities be credited with? The answer to this series of questions constitutes both the general and specific objectives of this work. However, the relevance of this research lies in the literature, where the work carried out by K.R. OURA (2010, p.190-197) on Bonoua served as a benchmark. Although this author dwelt extensively on the relationship between agriculture and urbanization, he had the merit of reviewing the traditional organization of Abouré society. These writings have reinforced the thesis defended in this study, whose aim is to understand

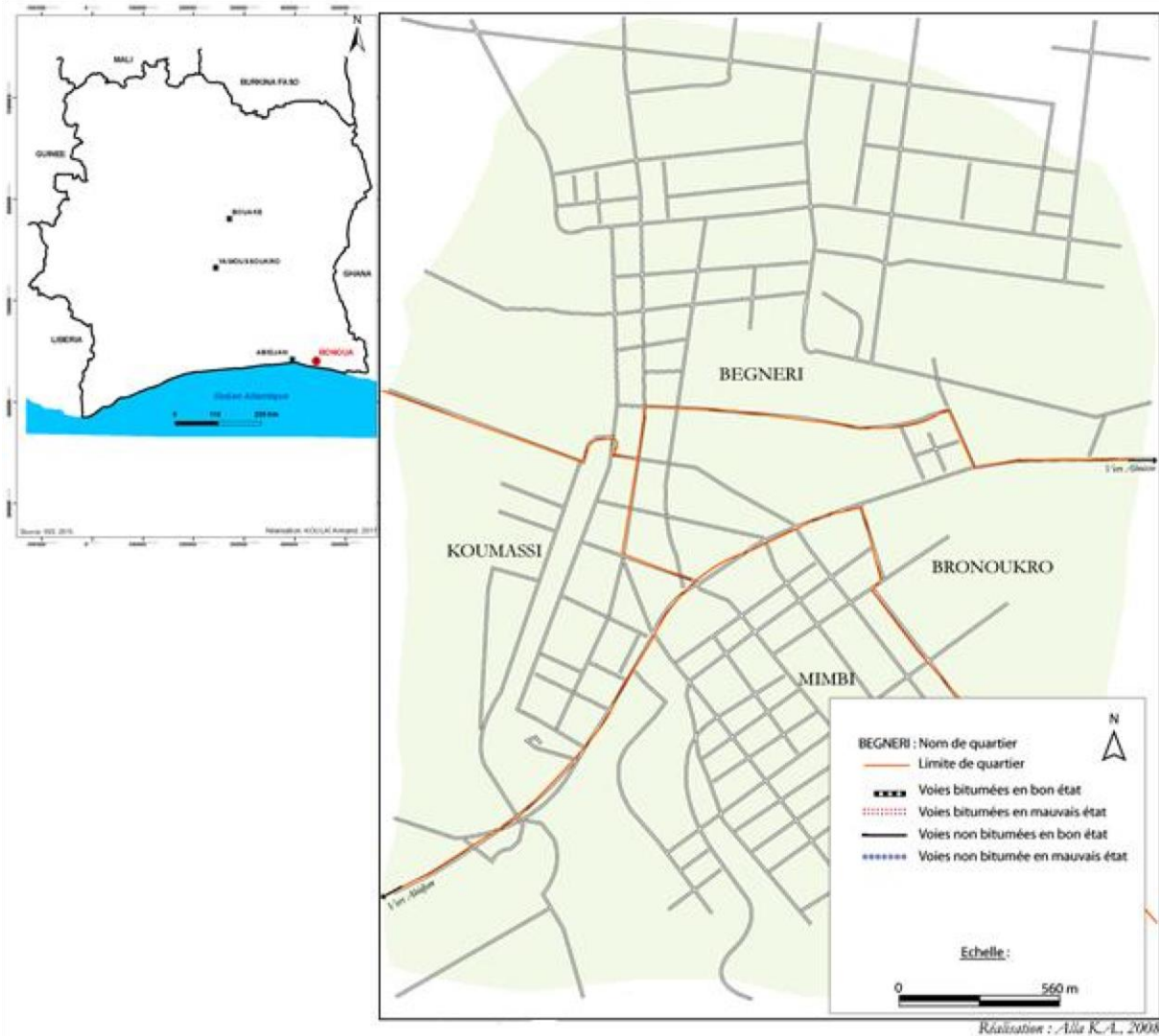
and deepen the work on the role of Abouré customary power as an actor in the socio-economic development of Bonoua, following the example of the municipality.

## 1-STUDY FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

### 1.1-PRESENTATION OF THE STUDY AREA

A town in southeastern Côte d'Ivoire around 60 km from the metropolis of Abidjan, Bonoua belongs to the Grand-Bassam department in the Sud-comoé region (Map 1). It is the largest or main Abouré town by population, estimated at 69,983 according to the 2014 RGPH. Bonoua is inhabited by the Ehive a sub-group of the Abouré people. It is considered an agricultural town, being the capital of pineapple and manioc. It has even been described as an "agroville", i.e. a town that relies on agriculture for its development (K.R.OURA, 2010, p.378).

**Map 1: Geographical location of the town of Bonoua**



### 1.2-DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY

This work was initially based on documentary exploration through books, scientific articles and academic documents such as dissertations and theses. We also consulted statistical and cartographic documents. This documentary data was consulted in libraries, research institutes or centers, or on the Internet. In addition to documentary research, field surveys were also necessary. These included direct observation, interviews with customary and administrative authorities, and surveys of the local population using questionnaires. All this

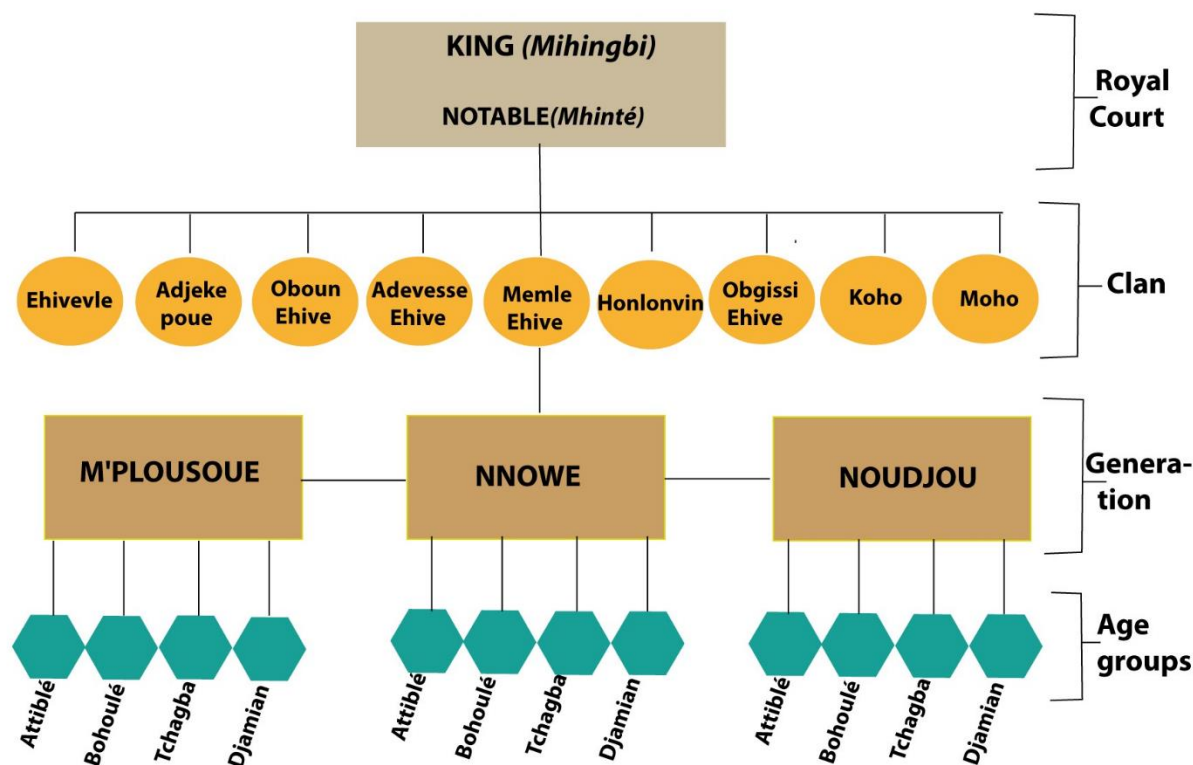
methodology enabled us to obtain data that will enable us to analyze and argue the role of Abouré customary power as a player in the socio-economic development of the Bonoua locality.

## II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 2.1-ORGANIZATION OF ABOURE CUSTOMARY POWER IN BONOUA

#### 2.1.1-SOCIOPOLITICAL STRUCTURE

Abouré customary power remains centralized. This characteristic is not peculiar to Abouré society, but to the entire Akan ethnic group, which dominates the eastern, central and southern regions of Côte d'Ivoire. It is a power made up of four pillars. These are the royal court or royalty, clans, generations and age groups. The structure of customary power is illustrated in figure 1.



Source: Personal surveys, 2023

Figure 1: Sociopolitical structure of Abouré customary power

#### ➤ *Royalty or royal court*

Bonoua royalty consists of the King and his notables. Called "Mhingbi", the King symbolizes the Abouré people. He is appointed according to selection criteria based on birth, moral integrity and physical aptitude. As such, the person proposed for the throne must necessarily belong to the royal clan known as "Ehivevle". "Ehivevle", be of good moral character and free of physical and mental disabilities. The notability (Mhinté) traditionally comprises seven members. But with the evolution of Abouré society, there has been an internal subdivision, so that today there is a large number of notables around the seven. It is from among these notables that a chief is chosen to act as interim king in case of absence.

#### ➤ *Clan families (clans)*

According to notability, a clan is made up of a group of families claiming a common ancestor. Each family is symbolized by a seat around which it gathers and organizes itself. There are as many seats as there are families. The Abourés are made up of nine clans, which have often been dispersed due to the wars these societies have experienced. Today, only Bonoua groups together all the clans, which are made up as follows:

- Ehivevle, 10 seats
- Adjekepoue, 6 seats
- Oboun Ehive, 5 seats
- Adevesse Ehive, 5 seats
- Memle Ehive, 4 seats

- Honlonvin, 4 seats
- Ogbissi Ehive, 3 seats
- Koho, 1 seat
- Moho, 1 seat

➤ ***Generations and age groups***

A generation is a promotion of age groups. It's the group of men or women who have been divided into age groups at the same time, and who have therefore received the same initiation. The age class groups together individuals belonging to the same age group within a generation. Whereas within clans, relationships are hierarchical, within age classes, on the other hand, members are all equal and consider each other as comrades. There are three generations, each comprising four age groups. These are the M'ploussoué, Nnowé and Noudjou generations, and the :

Attiblé, Bohoulé, Tchagba, Djamian. And so;

- The M'ploussoué generation is the one that learns how to exercise power,
- The Nnowé generation is that of the wise,
- The Noudjou generation is the one that exercises power.

It should be noted that each generation hands over its functions to the younger generation according to its degree of maturity. As for age groups, it should be noted that ;

- Attiblé: these are the oldest members of the generation. As such, they are the sages, advisors and organizers of society.
- Bohoulé age group: these are the cadets, the warriors, the defenders of the Abouré country.
- Tchagba age group: these members look after the village and social affairs. They ensure the safety of the elderly, women and children.
- Djamian age group: these are the youngest children. They are reservists in times of war.

### **2.1.2 GOVERNANCE SYSTEM**

Traditional Abouré power is a kind of customary monarchy with hereditary power through matrilineal lineage (S. DUGAST, 1995, p. 409). Access to power relations is structured by the mode of filiation. Thus, to gain access to power and land inheritance, "players must be exclusively of Abouré mother" (K. R. OURA, 2010, p.100 and p.192).

In practice, the heir is chosen by the women's council and then submitted to the clan chief. The various actors interviewed in Bonoua assert that the women's choices have never been contested, as they obey laws and rules known and respected by all. In short, "in Abouré society, inheritance of land, property or hierarchical positions in institutions of customary power is based on matrilineal lineage" (K. R. OURA, 2010, p.100 and p.192). This mode of governance, based on matriarchal kinship, is perpetuated from generation to generation among the Abouré people of Bonoua.

### **2.2-ORIGINAL ROLES AND MISSIONS OF ABOURE CUSTOMARY POWER**

From the royal court to age groups, clans and generations, Abouré customary power has functions and responsibilities similar to those of all customary organizations in Côte d'Ivoire. Generally speaking, these roles consist of guaranteeing and ensuring the smooth running of traditional Abouré society, in this case by ensuring respect for the practices handed down to them by their ancestors. This general idea of protecting custom is reflected in the various roles and missions entrusted to the different pillars of traditional power. The royal court is the guardian of tradition and customary institutions. As the holder of legislative judicial power, it is the royal court that passes laws and ensures they are enforced. This function, which can be described as "regalian", enables them not only to ensure the smooth running of the court, but also to settle disputes arising in traditional society. The clan is the pillar with the most roles and missions in Abouré customary power. The clan is headed by a chief, usually the family elder. This chief is the guardian of the clan's wealth and property. He oversees the education and marriage of the children. Exclusive holder of the right to choose heirs according to custom, the family dean (chief) is responsible for all ceremonies organized within the clan, as well as for settling conflicts. The main task of the generations is to empower individuals according to age group. Each age category has a specific function. The Attiblés, the oldest members of the generation, are the society's sages, advisors and organizers. They are also the generation's decision-makers. The Behoulé (cadets) are the warriors and defenders of the Abouré country.

The Tchagba (eldest), i.e. those born after a brother or sister, are generally involved in social matters, but often provide security for the elderly, women and children. As for the Djamians (youngest children), they are reservists in times of war. From all these descriptions, we can see that customary power had and still has purely traditional roles and missions, in accordance with Abouré custom. As such, the exercise of this power can be described as a "custom of power" (C-H. PERROT and F-X. FAUVELLE-AYMAR, 2003, p.6). If Abouré customary power exercises its authority according to customary prescriptions, how has it become an actor in local development in Bonoua? Our actions in the field will undoubtedly provide some answers to this question.



### **2.3-DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES BY ABOURE CUSTOMARY AUTHORITIES**

Although not recognized as a development player by state structures, Abouré customary authorities initiate development actions in the town of Bonoua. These actions are of several kinds: in terms of housing, socio-economic infrastructures, the environment and culture.

#### **2.3.1 ABOURE CUSTOMARY POWER AND HOUSING IN BONOUA**

The actions of customary power in the field of housing take the form of generational intervention. In this respect, the majority of respondents stated that "this power is considered to be the traditional political institution that plays a major role in social development in Bonoua". Historically, it has been said that the generation was the organization that renewed habitats after the passage of another. So, according to the notability, "these actions are not a waste, but rather a deep-seated desire for comfort and security in the home". With the evolution of Abouré society, these practices of total destruction after each generation's term of office no longer occur. However, the concern for a healthy living environment through real estate construction takes another form. These are measures in favor of individuals wishing to build in Bonoua. To this end, customary law provides a framework and protection for people wishing to invest in real estate. Generation groups have passed laws to discourage "any malefactor". To this end, a fine of 300,000 FCFA is imposed on anyone suspected of engaging in such practices (K. R. OURA, 2010, p.201). These measures by the authorities are factors that have enabled the existence of beautiful construction in Bonoua.

#### **2.3.2 ABOURE CUSTOMARY POWER AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURES IN BONOUA**

These actions largely concern school infrastructures. In the opinion of the notability and the population, Bonoua has not needed enough government support or input from the State to set up schools. So, without waiting for the State to intervene, the generations initiated projects to build the first public elementary school, as well as teachers' housing, thanks to contributions from the population. In the words of one prominent figure: "The contributions concern all Abouré over the age of 18, and amount to 2,000 CFA francs for women and 4,000 CFA francs for men per year". This involvement of the customary authorities in investing in education is partly due to the early Abouré leaders, who understood very early on that education is the foundation of any form of emancipation. The objective set for the entire Abouré population of Bonoua was for each neighborhood to build at least one school. This has created healthy competition between the different neighborhoods, and has enabled the locality to have a large number of primary schools. As a result, all five of Bonoua's neighborhoods have elementary school, and the number is growing all the time. From 23 schools in the 1990s, the town has almost 47 establishments in 2019, according to the Bonoua primary education inspectorate. If all these school infrastructures are not the sole responsibility of the customary authorities, they are the inspiration behind them. The actions of the Abouré customary authorities also extended to the secondary level, with contributions initiated by the generations for the construction of the town's first modern high school. This initiative was hailed by the Ivorian government in the 1980s, which hoped that such actions would serve as an example to all other localities in the country.

#### **2.3.3-RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ABOURE CUSTOMARY POWER, ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES AND MANAGEMENT OF BONOUA'S URBAN ENVIRONMENT**

The Djamian youth group has set up several associations to control the economic sector in Bonoua. More than 70 youth associations are spread across the city's five districts" (M. J. M. BAH, 2005, p.45). These organizations have enabled young Abouré natives to become the main players in the informal sector, embodied by transport and trade. While the former is the business of young men, the latter is carried out by young girls. Trade involves the sale of food products such as attiéké and attoukpou (a round, compact loaf of varying thickness obtained by the same process as attiéké, but in a rather granular state). Young people are also interested in the environment of their "village", Bonoua. Indeed, according to N. M. BAKARY (2008, p. 102), "a group of young people from the Moudjou and Mploussoué generations have organized themselves into an 'environmental police force' to ensure compliance with the environmental rules established jointly by the customary authority and the municipality". This police force levies fines for violations. However, to be flexible and ensure better compliance with environmental laws, the group is increasingly raising awareness among the population for their well-being. Together with the mayor's office, they are urging people to dispose of their garbage in the trailers set up in the various districts. In short, the role of youth in the city's socio-economic development is well established.

#### **2.3.4 ABOURE CUSTOMARY POWER AND THE ORGANIZATION OF CULTURAL EVENTS IN BONOUA: POPO CARNAVAL**

A cultural event celebrated every year in Bonoua, the "Popo Carnaval" has its origins in the modifications that the young Aboure of Bonoua made to the annual yam festival. In 1946, they innovated by organizing the

"Popo" (which means "mask" in the Abouré language). Much later, as adults, they christened the festival "Popo Carnaval", introducing the modern aspect (carnival) in the form of a float parade. Since 1972, this festival has become a tradition for the Abouré people, who gather every year around Easter (April) to celebrate the same popular jubilation.

The "Popo Carnaval", which begins on a Saturday, opens with a week of shopping and entertainment (soccer match, theatrical performances, brass band, folk dances, etc.), followed by a parade of masked men, punctuated by dances and burlesque scenes. Sunday morning is devoted to ancestral worship and family reunions. The afternoon begins with a parade during which customary Abouré events take place (presentation of pubescent daughters, accompanying a wife to her husband's house, birth ceremony, etc.). It continues with parades of majorettes, magnificently decorated floats and folk dances in the main square known as Place du Popo. The carnival ends with a grand masked ball. Having become a very popular festival, the municipal authorities, in collaboration with the customary authorities, are planning to build the Popo carnival palace known as "Palais Noudjou".

### III. CONCLUSION

Bonoua, a town with a dynamic socio-demographic and economic structure, has always retained its customary power, despite the modernization of Abouré society. Based on the matrilineal system with a socio-political organization made up of four pillars, Abouré traditional power is highly influential in the urban area, thanks to the support of all sections of the population who continue to believe in it. In the minds of the people, Bonoua is still a village whose functioning cannot deviate from the existing social organization. As a result, the role of traditional authority is very much in evidence in the urban development process.

This is how customary authorities have been able to use their positions to carry out actions that contribute to Bonoua's influence. They have been able to intervene in the development of modern housing, educational infrastructures and even in the improvement of the living environment. Customary power has thus become a key player in the town's modernization process, as if it were a local authority (Marie). However, with these actions, this power has not replaced the mayor's office, so that there is a complementarity between these two actors for the "harmonious" development of Bonoua.

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