The Lebanese Community in the Ivory Coast: a Non-native Network at the Heart of Power?

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Introduction

For a long time ignored because of its relatively low profile, the Lebanese community in the Ivory Coast has recently become the focus of increasing attention. A whole string of derogatory clichés has come to be attached to it; more often than not they consist of fantasized projections originating in the Lebanese conflict or its after-effects, whether in Europe or Africa, to the extent that one can talk of a form of anti-Lebanese discourse constructed out the stereotyped images and outright misrepresentations.

On the French side, the image of the Lebanese community in Abidjan was once that of an appendage to colonization, symbolized in the figures of the Maronite Christian, the good tradesman or the civil war refugee; in little time this has changed into the supposed haven of anti-western terrorist lackeys of Hizbollah, usually Shi'i and Arabic speaking. Seen in this light the Lebanese of Abidjan now appear to be hostile to French interests in the area to the extent of becoming the sinister middlemen of attacks on French territory or of the freeing of French hostages. In the Ivory Coast itself, the Lebanese community was once seen as the indispensable middleman between town and country, whether in the trading of crops such as coffee and cocoa or of retail goods. But with the onset of the civil war in 1975, this image was to undergo fundamental transformations, through the flux of refugees which sharply increased from 1982 until the magnified economic crisis of 1986. The Lebanese now seem to qualify for a description akin to de Gaulle's equivocal statement about Israel after its attack on Lebanon in 1968: a confident (read overbearing), domineering people; racist to boot, they now exert an undue monopoly on imports and exports, trade and a part of industry. Corruptors of others as well as being themselves corrupt, they act as a fifth column working towards the disintegration of the state under the aegis of an ailing and important Houphouet-Boigny, and to 'palestinize' or 'lebanize' the Ivory Coast by securing a hold on the key posts of the economy. The development of this theme has results in nothing short of full-blown popular paranoia.

There is yet a third view, which at the intersection of the first two, sees itself as based upon rational economic discourse, and finds expression in the ranks of both the Ivorian ruling class and the local French business community. This view sees the Lebanese immigrants as intent on destroying the official trading economy and the sate itself through the bypassing of borders, non-payment of taxes and customs evasion. It follows from this view that dishonest competition has set in, with the result that French businessmen are now forced to disinvest from the country and and in longer term European influence will be eliminated to the sole benefit of the Lebanese. The Ivorians for their part complain of being unable to venture into any kind of business activity without coming up against the mafia-like solidarity and functioning of the Lebanese

community. This, the argument goes, is what stands in they way of the emergence of the native (lower) middle class which is precisely needed for the development of the country.

The economic crisis and prevailing uncertainty over the future have resulted in a degree of social frustration which has speedily found an ideal scapegoat in the Lebanese community whose erstwhile discretion is now but a memory of the past; its middlemen have an all too visible profile and have become too encroaching for comfort.

Besides their obvious over-simplifications, it should be mentioned in passing that these clichés in fact vary according to the community or social origins of their provenance. But even allowing for this, the question remains as to the actual state of relations between the Lebanese community and other communities; the extent to which it has integrated; and finally whether it does in fact play the destabilizing part in the life of the country which is so readily attributed to it.

In spite of certain gaps, this study will attempt to present an explanatory scheme of relations between the Lebanese in the Ivory Coast, the French and the Ivorians. This will also enable us to define the cross-currents which feed into the 'representation' of the Lebanese by others, the underlying reasons for this rapid change in perception and the social and political structures which underpin these constructs.

In order to do this it will first be necessary to review the actual history of this immigration; apart from being hardly known, the history has itself been subjected to the stereotyped clichés we alluded to earlier, and this has resulted in its being rewritten in order to conform to the current representation of the Lebanese.

A historical summary of the migration of the Syrian-Lebanese community to the Ivory Coast

A PREDOMINANTLY SHI'I MIGRATION

Contrary to general belief, Lebanese immigration to the Ivory Coast has a long history and is of predominantly Shi'i character, or at least of southern Lebanese origin. It began as a result of the silk-worm crisis which struck the country in the middle of nineteenth century and caused the departure of many Lebanese, in particular peasants from the South who found it difficult to survive. The exodus accelerated under the pressures of the turmoil which beset the Ottoman empire and threatened the cohesion of Mount Lebanon with the onset of the first world war. As a result of these events, the Lebanese were driven increasingly far from their country, all the way to West Africa. Parallel to this some were recruited by brokers in maritime trade from Marseille, and while this resulted in some of them going all the way to America, others, beset by financial or health problems, stopped in Africa.

The Ivory Coast saw the arrival of a mere three Lebanese in 1920, a much smaller figure than for Sierra Leone or Senegal, but the number increased to 71 in 1926 and 243 in 1930. From the on the increase was to be sustained, almost the scale of a geometrical curve.

Nearly all these newcomers were poor and uneducated Shi'i peasants from the South, who bore little resemblance to the traditional image of the Levantine Lebanese. As Georges Corm put it, 'These mountainous rural communities from which came the bulk

of immigration were not Levantines; they were attached to the mountain territory, whereas Levantines are trading families of European origin who have settle in the Levant and engaged in trading on a large scale. The few families which had settled in the Ivory Coast would, therefore, accept tasks which no one else in the white community was prepared to take on, such as buying local primary products in remote villages to deliver them to trading companies. They benefited from the fact that the French refused to do such hard work at prevailing wages and from the companies' mistrust of local labour; from the earliest time, therefore, the Lebanese became the indispensable middlemen between 'blacks' and 'whites', a function which appears to have hardly changed with time and easily fits into the structure of African societies where trade is always the domain of aliens.

Following the crisis of 1929 and the development of cash-crop farming (cocoa and coffee) the need arose for a white yet cheap labour force, and the small Lebanese community which had by then begun to occupy positions of responsibility in distant outposts from the capital called upon their 'cousins' who had remained behind in their villages. This resulted in a steady increase in the number of Lebanese arrivals in the Ivory Coast, and in the growth of links between particular villages of origin and areas of arrival. Such links were rather tighter than is generally though and were not interchangeable. In 1938 for example, 30 per cent of the Ivory Coast Lebanese lived in the region of Gagnoa Daloa where they were involved in the cultivation of coffee and cocoa. The extension of this network of relations was to benefit from the departure of European agents in 1940, and they gradually established their autonomy *vis-à-vis* trading and import-export companies (such as CFAO) in order to create their own trading networks. From then on their wealth grew and they developed a trading system which was already underpinned by the Lebanese emigrants. They imported European and American goods for the benefit of Lebanese merchants of Maronite origin and shared them out between semi-wholesale and retail traders from their own villages, exporting in turn African agricultural goods through permanent trading counters abroad.

This forward thrust by the Lebanese community soon sparked off racist reactions among poor whites who accused them of failing to pay export patents, of circumventing commercial regulations and even of creating a health hazard because of their lack of hygiene; thus 61 Lebanese were expelled from the Ivory Coast between 1928 and 1938. This set of attitudes, with the possible exception of the last, prevails to this day, even though it is mistakenly believed to be a new development stemming from the immigration of 1975.

This questions the assertion that the Lebanese problem is of recent origin and that it is possible to contrast two waves of migration, one originating in colonization and the other resulting in civil war of 1975. Such a caesura fails to place the Lebanese community within the framework of the historical development of the structure of Ivorian society and has two consequences: it allows the retroactive manufacture of an idealized image of the Lebanese during the colonial period which is in direct contradiction with testimonies of the period; and it conceals the part played by the Lebanese in colonial society in which they acted not only as economic middlemen but also as political and cultural intermediaries: a kind of buffer which enabled the French to stay clear of becoming too 'africanized', too 'wild' in the hinterland.

The success of the first generation of settlers and the demand for labour by producers, whether French or Lebanese, led to an increase in the number of Lebanese immigrants between 1945 and 1960. Their sphere of activity diversified. They branched into forestry development, transport, real estate, import-export and small-scale industry (baking, confectionery, printing etc.) By 1953 their numbers had risen to over 2,000, of whom 1,200 were in Abidjan.

It hardly needs pointing out that even such a brief historical sketch questions the over-hasty identification of the Lebanese with speculative import-export business, since it shows that the community had diversified its activities as early as the 1940s. This diversification resulted in an enlargement of the areas of settle of immigrants. The Ivory Coast was becoming a profitable place; it was safe to invest there. Some Maronite families with southern connexions through their Shi'i relatives now came to settle in the Ivory Coast, but mainly in Abidjan and Bouake, engaging in more ambitious commercial and industrial ventures. A number of fortunes were made, as witness the Nassar brothers, the Gemayels, but also the Moukarzels, the Fakry Abdulatifs. Though in minority, Maronites and Sunnis had the lion's share of the wealth. Their much greater social visibility partly accounts for the fact that they were to be subsequently spontaneously identified with the first wave of immigration of which they were but a small minority.

Two tendencies are therefore observable: on the one hand, there is the regionalization of movements of emigration from Lebanon to the Ivory Coast, which split into different routes and arrival points depending on communal and religious allegiances; and, on the other, there is the internationalization of these movements from this time onwards beyond the Ivory Coast to the rest of West Africa with whose political and economic fluctuations they vary.

To be comprehensive, this study would have to include the whole area in order to measure the impact of political developments and economic growth upon the motives for Lebanese migration within the area. This would enable us to have a better understanding of the historical origins of the links between Lebanese families whose members spread to Guinea, the Ivory Coast, or Sierra Leone.

THE GROWTH, DIVERSIFICATION AND INCREASE IN WEALTH OF THE IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY

The influx of Lebanese immigrants increased in the wake of independence and economic success in the Ivory Coast. This was not only due to fresh arrivals from Lebanon itself, but also because Lebanese from Ghana, Guinea and Mali etc. opened their own trading counters in the Ivory Coast, thus turning it into the centre of their operations and of the external trading networks they were setting up. This was encouraged by the reassuring stance and prevailingly liberal ideology of the regime, as well as the absence of nationalizations and expulsions. Abidjan became the converging point for the Lebanese, whose activities had so far been rather scattered across the country. This does not mean that Lebanese traders disappeared from the rest of the scene, but rather that their importance within the community decreased in relation to trading and import-export business based in Abidjan.

Investment regulations which had come into effect since independence were extremely favourable to foreigners, and following in the footsteps of the French and Lebanese invested in the secondary and tertiary sectors. Their presence was particularly felt in the areas of semi-wholesale trading, transport and import-export. By 1965, there were 7,000 Lebanese in the Ivory Coast, with over half of them in Abidjan. Ten years later the number had risen to about 15,000, excluding those who had chosen to become naturalized. In any case these figures are lower than the real numbers because they only include heads of families, omitting wives and children: from 1960 to 1975 – unlike the preceding period – Lebanese immigrants tended to bring their families with them instead of coming as single men. This testifies to the strong economic incentive which had by now become a major cause of immigration. By that time, immigrants felt they could quickly succeed by relying on the support of families and fellow immigrants who were already established. There was far less criticism of them than during the colonial period, and the Ivorians accepted this quasi-monopoly on the trading sector. Their aim was indeed to try to get into trading networks which offered natives easier access than did French businesses.

LEBANESE CIVIL WAR REGUEES: A SECOND WAVE?

Though relations between the communities could not be termed idyllic, the Lebanese felt welcome in the Ivory Coast and did not live in fear of pogrom or expulsion, as did the Indians in East Africa. It is, therefore, not surprising that many Lebanese chose the Ivory Coast as a haven following the outbreak of the civil war in 1975. The more wealthy came by air and, for years to come, every Wednesday the Beirut-Abidjan line brought new refugees at an uninterrupted flow of 400 a week. The poorer ones came by boat to join their families in many smaller towns. The social structure of Lebanese immigration to the country, of preponderantly Shi'i origin, accounts for the influx of refugees from South Lebanon who found more welcoming conditions in the Ivory Coast than elsewhere in Africa.

President Houphouet-Boigny himself took an interest in their circumstances and for a while no restrictions were placed on their movements. Access to the country was free and customs formalities were kept to a minimum. The problem was that the influx did not subside, and indeed it increased after the Israeli war of 1982, and some time around 1985-6 a kind of threshold was breached. The Lebanese now numbered some 80,000 – about four to five times as many as ten years earlier – and were considered all the more intrusive as they concentrated in the well-to-do parts of Abidjan where they were much more 'visible'. The overall picture was now turned upside down and the negative stereotypes gained even wider currency as the French attempted to implicate the Ivory Coast Lebanese in the organization of attacks.

The communal character of immigration since 1975, far from contrasting with that of the earlier phase, carries over directly from it. It is rather the size of the immigrant community which is at issue both in hostile reactions to it and the resulting political issues.

THE DISPUTE ABOUT THE NUMBER OF LEBANESE IMMIGRANTS IN THE IVORY COAST

Above and beyond the lack of statistical accuracy of the different censuses and surveys in the Ivory Coast, there is a political issue at stake in the disagreements concerning the size of the Lebanese population. Its opponents, who feel threatened by its influence, tend to grossly exaggerate the numbers: thus publications such as *Le Point* and *L'Express* have quoted figures of between 200,000 and 300,00 Lebanese in the Ivory Coast for the year 1986, based on statements by French businessmen and a few Ivory Coast Home Office officials. The Lebanese dispute this figure, and through the body which in principle represents them, the ULMCI (Union Libanaise Mondiale en Côte d'Ivoire), have given the figure taken from registrations with the consulate: 50,000, to which they add 10,000 in transit, the Ivory Coast being as much a stopping point as a place of residence. Allowing for the fact that is downplays clandestine immigration, this figure is nonetheless rather more credible than the 300,000 given by the press. If one considers the rate of emigration since 1975 and the diversity of host countries as well as the sizeable number of Lebanese who have fled to Europe and the Americas (not to mention neighbouring Middle Eastern countries), it follows that the figure of 300,000 would account for 70 per cent of all Lebanese in Black Africa. Now, while the Ivory Coast is indeed one of the more important host countries, the Lebanese are also to be found in great numbers in Senegal, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and to a lesser extent in Congo, Gabon and Zaire.

Clearly the 300,000 figure is an exaggeration. A customs official has in fact explained to us how it was arrived at: it is based on all arrivals registered at the airport, and the figure is then multiplied by four or five to include dependants who do not register, while simultaneously failing to take into consideration departures for countries such as Guinea and Benin. While this final figure has been used by Home Office officials to alert the country's leaders to a potential Lebanese problem, it remains without serious foundation.

In our opinion, a realistic estimate, which would take into account the 1986 census, consulate figures as well as those of Lebanese with dual or triple nationality (French-Ivorian-Lebanese), would put the final figure between 85,000 and 100,000. This has probably decreased since the economic crisis of 1988, resulting for the first time in a reversal of the ascending curve of Lebanese emigration to the Ivory Coast. Paradoxically, people are allowing fantasies of a Shi'i Lebanese tide swamping the Ivory Coast to run away with them at the time of the first pull-back.

Divisions within the Community

Until now, I have considered the Lebanese community as a single entity by emphasizing its historically unifying feature, namely a very strong Shi'i majority, rather than its internal differences. This has been more a matter of presentation than an accurate reflection of the facts themselves, since we have already noted that Lebanese immigrants tend to go through tighter networks than may at first be apparent – whether defined by

family, village or religion – networks which tend to live side by side without any real interaction. There are several ramifications and hosting structures within these networks, but each Lebanese can only hope to make use of any given one of them depending on his village of origin, his social position or his creed.

Lebanese origin does not of itself create the necessary condition for being welcome into the new country, as it does in Latin America. Much more than nationality, the 'clan' or village here provides the basis for solidarity. According to several interviews, the Lebanese who have long been settled in Adjame tend to come from Tyre, Kanan and Zerarich. They have set up a mutual aid fund on the African model of the tontine in order to help newcomers or develop a business; but apparently the system only works in the case of members of a common village of origin or of the same local militia.

It follows from this that the image of a united Lebanese community is deceptive. There certainly exists an institutional umbrella which creates a consensus under the aegis of the ULMCI, but this façade is more a matter of show than of substance and it has not prevented the occurrence of clashes between different Lebanese communities, on the pre-condition that such differences are concealed from the rest of the population. We should, therefore, carefully distinguish between the image of the community which officials of the Lebanese community seek to project and the underlying reality of its activities. Attention also needs to be paid to the extent to which this attempt to project a consensual image backfires upon them in that such an attempt is unable to meet the challenge of negative perceptions, to whose dissemination it contributes by allowing them to apply to all sections of the community indiscriminately.

THE OFFICIAL IMAGE OF A UNITED AND LOYAL COMMUNITY

Through various associations under the ULCMI umbrella, the Lebanese of long-standing settlement in the Ivory Coast have set themselves several objectives: (1) A social and economic programme: defending the economic interests of all Lebanese traders and protecting the community against adverse conditions; (2) A cultural programme: the preservations of Lebanese traditions within the community and among the younger generation; (3) Of late, an all but political programme: to monitor immigration and subsume internal differences within the community. These objectives cannot be openly declared since the statutes of the ULMCI forbid activities of a political nature.

The ULMCI was created in 1967 and is of appreciable symbolic importance since its officials are the most important partners of the president's dialogue with the Lebanese community. They are accountable to him for the actions of its members and unofficially in charger of the immigration problem and any possible skids in the system. Though acknowledged and required to contribute to 'good causes', they are also rebuked whenever one of their members steps out of line. The ULMCI has a membership of 64 per cent Muslims and 36 per cent Christians, but the total number of members is extrememly low since there are only 500 of them, i.e. 0.5 per cent of the total community. The ULMCI is above all committed to protecting professional interests and acts as a chamber of commerce, as is shown by the organizational charter of its various committees. Its principal interventions take place when a problem arises with customs, and it provides legal help to any member of the community who may request it. It also acts as an advertisement for the community at large through the women's section and the

committee for public relations by publicizing the community's donations in cash or kind to poorer indigenous areas in newspapers (donations towards housing, hospitals and schools). The sports committee and the group of major traders for their part provide substantial financial backing for Ivorian national football championship teams; given the political importance of their games at which local and ethnic identification is very strong, it is not hard to see that this is no disinterested action. The officials themselves admit as much: the policy aims to pacify popular resentment against the Lebanese in Abidjan.

The posture which the ULMCI tries to uphold on behalf of the Lebanese community is a very defensive one. If it is to be believed there are no divisions among the Lebanese. They are united and only want one thing, to start a new life in peace and forget the horrors of war. They refuse all inquiries and postulate that to live in peace it is necessary to keep to oneself. Anything which questions this rosy picture of a united community is, therefore, forcefully denied.

THE CRACKS IN THE INSTITUTIONAL FAÇADE

However, conflicts have for long existed beneath the seemingly flawless façade. Drawing up the ULMCI's constitution was itself a battle of wills which the present leaders do not like to recall. The first association which sought to regroup expatriated Lebanese was the ULM, founded in 1960 by the Lebanese of South America. The creation of an Ivorian subsidiary was then contemplated but a project to that end headed by the Maronite patriarch Father Koury failed in 1965 because of an opposition from existing associations: the Lebanese community of Bassam, founded in 1940, the Lebanese Associations of Abidjan in 1950, and the Lebanese Association of the Ivory Coast in 1964. This was followed by a visit to the Ivory Coast by the Imam Moussa Sadr who felt concern at the attempted pre-eminence of the Christians over a community which he rightly considered to be a predominantly Shi'i one. In this he came to rely upon the offices of Baham Donny Joseph to create an Ivorian branch over which the Shi'is would exercise political control, which is what indeed took place when Hakil Boro became its first president in 1967. The Christians were not excluded as a consequence and were given the vice-presidency.

Until the 1980s this compromise worked without running into serious problems, with traditional authority figures managing the affairs of their respective religious communities, while the Lebanese as a whole displayed a common front against both the Ivorians and the French.

But as the image of the Lebanese deteriorated, some Maronites began to want to set themselves apart from the Shi'is while others remained attached to the ideal of consensual representation, stating that criticism of the Shi'is was dangerous since the Ivorians, in case of pogrom, would not draw any distinctions. The problem faced by the Lebanese can be summed up in the following choice: they can either maintain the common front, or publicly disown the activities of some of their members, either alternative carrying risks of its own. In any case, it is impossible, on reflection, to believe that the Lebanese community in the Ivory Coast can hope to steer clear of the Lebanese war which has caught up with it and sharpened already existing rifts.

NETWORKS OF SOLIDARITY AND TENSIONS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

It is extremely difficult to identify the networks of primary allegiance among the Lebanese. Is it the nuclear or extended family, the village, the district, faith, political allegiance or economic activity? What are the rifts within the immigrant community and are they stronger or weaker than in Lebanon? Are expatriation and a common lot sufficiently binding factors for the sense of a shared identity, which has all but disintegrated in Lebanon itself since the eighties, to be of some significance in the Ivory Coast?

THE CLEAVAGE BETWEEN NEWCOMERS AND SECOND- OR THIRD-GENERATION IMMIGRANTS

Whereas this rift was of hardly any consequence before 1975, it has since then become of primary importance. In the face of the growing hostility of the Ivorians, those Lebanese who have long been settled are divided between the wish to help their newly arrived relatives from Lebanon and the real risk of facing total rejection if their community is seen to multiply itself. But while all may be in agreement about the common danger, this attitude does not apply at the level of many individuals who continue to harbor their relatives. However much the ULMCI's discourse may forbid it to acknowledge such tensions, the practice no longer necessarily follows from this discourse. Some Lebanese from the first wave are among the first to criticize their new compatriots who refuse to integrate, continue to speak Arabic and bring with them the problems of the Lebanese war.

THE GENERATION CLEAVAGE

The chronological rift carries over into the generation one. We have already seen that 'the community' operates under the banner of ULMCI institutions headed by the traditional figureheads of the Maronite and Shi'i communities. These authorities most often command the respect of the elders of the community, whether they are recent arrivals or long standing settlers. But this does not extend to the younger generation who, whether they have been educated in Lebanon or in the Ivory Coast, tend to take a caustic view of the old values. With the process of westernization, young women are less bound by traditional codes of modesty, and young men go out to bars a lot more; the codes of conduct command less allegiance to the extent that this younger generation has grown up with the war and the only authority it has experienced is the rule of the militias.

It is worth considering here the contradictory influences which mould the younger Lebanese generation: thus, the often rampant consumerism they indulge in (possibly by way of compensation for the hardships of war) is negated by Islamic radicalism which poses as the defender of moral values in the face of the permissive behaviour of women, the rise in criminality and drugs. The question here is whether such a posture can hope to significantly influence the younger population, or on the contrary whether the latter are too attached to the freedoms and standards of living which those living in Lebanon have lost. Though a more detailed enquiry would be needed to answer this conclusively, my own opinion is that Islamic radicalism cannot hope to touch more than a small minority

of young people, but those who are receptive to it are likely to be the fiercer in their convictions for their proximity to 'corrupt' circles. Not that this strengthens any sense of allegiance they may feel towards the traditional authority figures whose lack of fibre they hold responsible for this deterioration in the first place.

THE CONFESSIONAL CLEAVAGE

The reality of confessional rifts within the Lebanese community cannot be denied, even though these may not degenerate into violent clashes. It is unfortunately not true that the Lebanese bury their quarrels once out of their country, in spite of the revived image to that effect. Maronite and Sunni immigrants have not cohabitated for a long time; or to be more exact they live side by side but restrict any contact to the demands of trade. There are, therefore, no mixed marriages. They even retain distinct family structures: the nuclear monogamous family for the Maronites, and the extended family often with communal living arrangements for the Shi'is. Without necessarily resulting in hostility among members of different communities, the Lebanese war and its militia environment have left their mark. The cleavage is one between Shi'is and the other Lebanese.

THE POLITICAL RIFT

This is probably the one that the Ivory Coast Lebanese most strenuously deny and yet, with the socio-economic one, the most real. Finding work within one's village or district is far less a matter of religious denomination than whether one's political allegiances are to the Christian Phalange, the Druze militia, to Amal or Hizbollah, or whether one subscribes to pro-Syrian or pro-Palestinian ideologies. The militias have provided structures of their own for the different communities and in so doing have displaced the traditional authorities. Individuals are required to make contributions to fund the war effort in Lebanon. Much as in Beirut itself, the youngest members of the community are recruited to collect these dues while immigrants are continuously having the good fortune of their immunity from the war impressed on them, and their moral obligation to make at least a financial contribution to national liberation or to the new Lebanon. This pressure on occasions develops into an outright racket as when organized gangs attack commercial premises. One the whole, the Ivorian authorities tend to turn a blind eye to such settling of scores so long as they are not too visible.

Houphouet-Boigny has made it a condition that the Lebanese should not dabble in politics in Abidjan and turn the city into a 'Beirut-on-the-Lagoon'. The point has been well taken by the community at large, hence the fact that conflicts tend to be smoothed over or concealed. By far the strongest in its control over citizens, the Amal militia relies on old structures and has set up its own police to watch over fresh arrivals. The appointment of a non French-speaking former leader of the Amal youth section as Lebanese ambassador to the Ivory Coast is probably not fortuitous. He was sent to keep a watchful eye over an increasingly unruly and divided community and indeed succeeded in imposing a more moderate line upon Amal leaders while keeping a distance with Hizbollah. It would appear, however, that he enjoys less than smooth relations with the ULMCI who question his somewhat authoritarian methods. According to members of the

Ivorian police, militias have been set up in order to maintain law and order within the community with the blessing of the power that be, who might on this occasion include the president himself.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLEAVAGE

The rifts arising out of social inequalities have received little attention, and yet an understanding of these is crucial in order to qualify the all-embracing statements that tend to be made about the community as a whole, quite apart from the very real political cleavages which express the rifts between the different communities. There are few common features between the manufacturer, the small retailer and the intermediary in trading in kind. The negative stereotypes which are being pinned to the Lebanese are based on the two extremes at either end of the social scale, the wealthy and the privileged on the one hand and the unemployed on the other, each in turn becoming arbitrarily identified with the community as a whole.

The facts are these: the major industrialists, owners of commercial chains, the few forestry developers, insurance agents and real estate entrepreneurs who have collectively been accused of every kind of corruption account for less than 10 per cent of the community and often come from long-settled and extremely wealthy families. At the other end, the jobless who have survived on petty crime are also in a very small minority – probably less than 5 per cent. The remaining 85 per cent can be accounted for as follows: a few are members of the liberal professions (doctors, lawyers and teachers); the majority includes a great number of retailers and especially of wage earners in trade and industry with no fixed financial status who are heavily dependent on their employers. These last categories are the most vulnerable to criticism and the first to feel the effects of any crises. Very few are those who, like their wealthy parents, can live on the Plateau, with villa, luxury car and gaudy clothes as status symbols; and even few are those convicted of petty thieving and crime; yet it is on the perception of both these extreme categories that rests the overall reputation of the Lebanese community.

In my opinion, these multiple cleavages make the notion of a ‘Lebanese community in the Ivory Coast’ a misleading one. It would be more accurate to speak of several communities from a common diaspora. And while it may at first sight not be impossible to speak on a non-native community akin to the French or the Burkinabe, it is in the final instance clear that the strongly internationalized structure of the Ivory Coast allows the Lebanese diaspora to function as a *network* which operates world wide through the channels of family and village clientelism and scattering throughout the world. This concept of network appears to be the most fruitful for an understanding of the different sets of allegiance and conflict within the Lebanese diaspora; while the latter term seems preferable to ‘community’, as it suggests, not an enclosed territory, but the cross-border dimension of Lebanese immigration in the Ivory Coast. Grasping this dimension is crucial to an understanding of both the economic and political activities of this diaspora.

THE LEBANESE IN IVORIAN SOCIETY

The concept of a 'Lebanese community', therefore, exists only in the eyes of its beholders, whether French or Ivorian, in other words of a group of people with common values, interests and internal loyalties. I have already drawn attention to the cultural stereotypes which have been appended to them and believe it is now necessary to discuss both the origins of these stereotypes as well as the core of truth they may contain.

What marks out the Lebanese in the eyes of the Ivorians is their ostentatiousness, or 'ethos of munificence' (to quote Jean-François Bayard) which has led them to forsake their low-profile reserve of earlier years in favour of an aggressive display of the power which wealth confers upon them. In popular areas, the worst of it is the attitude of young Lebanese men towards native women whom they pursue while tending to despise them. Cultural differences between the two communities over the status of women are such that communication is impossible. By entering into sexual contact with Ivorian women while refusing most of the time to marry them – and at all times to allow any of their own women to engage with Ivorian men – the Lebanese can only appear as 'ravishers' of women. This is the main grievance, the most deeply withheld and carefully concealed one, but for this very reason the most real. It accounts for popular resentment and the ease with which some Ivory Coast politicians exploit it to further their ends. But this is only made possible by the fact that this resentment is fed by other grievances which are easier to express and touch upon the economic and political activities of the Lebanese.

We should, however, not exaggerate: not all Ivorians feel such hostility towards the Lebanese. As often in such cases, the most favourable opinions are expressed by those who mix with them without being in a position of subservience. Praises are heard of their sense of human contact, their kindness, the help they are often willing to provide without asking for immediate repayment. But this remains a minority attitude; rejection is by far the more prevalent one.

Economic activity of the diaspora in the Ivory Coast

In their trading activities, the Lebanese's dealings with the Ivorians are of a ruthlessness that is all but reminiscent of colonial practices. The traditional contempt towards Africans prevails, even if it stops short of actual racism. To give but one example, African employees in Lebanese trading companies are often subjected to systematic body searches to avoid theft. They tend to be spoken of as if they did not exist and are often less well paid.

The result is a repressed hatred of the Lebanese which is liable to erupt at the smallest opportunity. More, the Lebanese often claim that Ivorians are the laziest among workers and that it is preferable to employ Malians and Burkinabes, which hardly improves their relations with the natives and has led the government to impose a quota of a fixed percentage of Ivorians. With the French, on the other hand, they are often cautious and avoid retaliating against the many provocations which French expatriates are fond of putting out in supposed reaction to the 'organized rackets' of the Lebanese.

IMPORT-EXPORT AND NON-PAYMENT OF TAXES

Import-export business has long been a prerogative of the Lebanese, and also the point on which criticism of them permanently recurs. This tallies with their own conception of free enterprise which prizes flexibility above all else. Unlike French and Ivorian official business whose bureaucratic procedures are highly developed, they dispense with bookkeeping and expensive head offices, employing a small staff most of whom have their own existing client base. This gives them a decisive edge in competing with their rivals. With sizeable resources which can be drawn upon within a structure which bears close resemblance to the informal network, several Lebanese businesses have grown at the chink of the two systems. This expansion often takes place in the interface between local and international business thanks to the scattering across the world of families whose rather archaic support network is, by virtue of its flexibility, well suited to the internationalization of business in a commercial environment in which it is possible to trail the route of a particular product from the African bush to the US stock market.

Nevertheless their preference for cross-border trade, their lack of managerial skills and their mistrust of the banking system, which leads them to favour fiduciary money as well as their foreign connections, also backfire to the extent that they tend to be in the front line of those suspected of fraud and a chosen target for control; this finds statistical confirmation in the fact that they are, in percentage terms relative to the rest of the population, at the top of the list of convictions for economic fraud.

Customs tax evasion is estimated at around 160 billion FCFA but if one cares to examine the embezzled sums this practice turns out to be as much the privilege of the French and Ivorians as of the Lebanese. The main charge against the Lebanese concerns their manner of bribing customs. There is no doubt that many traders would simply not make the same profits were it not for these corrupt practices which save them millions of FCFA, but it should be pointed out in their defence that they are by no means the only ones. Instead of making written forgeries, as do some French bosses, or relying on a network of official patronage, as do some Ivorian civil servants, the Lebanese quite simply bribe customs men in full sight of all concerned with money they carry around in suitcases. The most widely used technique, apart from the actual handling of suitcases full of dollars, consists in under-invoicing compensated by under the counter payments to members of the diaspora in the country of destination of the goods, whether France, Middle Eastern countries or South America. Another type of operation is the triangular one: economic agents in the Ivory Coast send funds to France or Lebanon to import French goods. These are purchased for them and paid for on the spot, which enables them to avoid the payment of certain taxes in the Ivory Coast.

Such economic fraud is thus quite simply more up front than other kinds, but not necessarily more serious. Always just on one side of the law and, in fact, not always aware of whether they are or are not breaking the rules, they prefer coming to ‘arrangements’ of various descriptions rather than submit to endless registration and control procedures. In so doing, they perpetuate an increasingly unfavourable image of themselves.

COFFEE, COCOA AND THE FLIGHT OF LEBANESE TRADERS

Ever since the colonial period, the Lebanese have acted as middlemen in the transportation of coffee and cocoa. The usual method for financing the season rests on

bank loans, advance finance for exporters and the middlemen's own funds. The latter loan funds to the peasants at the beginning of the season and at the start of the school term by taking options on his standing crop. They then take delivery of his total crop and sell it again on the open market to exporters, and finally settle with the farmer at a price in principle fixed by the CAISTAB. They system is thus dependent on mutual trust between all concerned. This trust can be said to have existed so long as the economic crisis had not thrown the system off balance. But problems have developed since then. After collecting the crop, a number of Lebanese middlemen fled to Ghana and Sierra Leone where the quotas established by the Ivory Coast do not exist and did not pay the farmers. This resulted in something akin to a man-hunt with an intervention by the ULMCI who proposed that the Lebanese community as a whole should be responsible and refund the planters. Nevertheless tension continues to run high because the middlemen tend to be in the front line of charges when such crises in financial arrangements occur.

Here again, however, the Lebanese are not the only perpetrators of this state of affairs. The policy of Houphouet-Boigny, who believed for a long time that the fall in prices on the world market was artificial and that he could defeat speculators by restricting shipments and fixing the price, had catastrophic results for the Ivory Coast as other international producers such as Ghana and Malasia did not follow suit and indeed took advantage of this to snatch their own share of the market. Financial resources and the availability of funds dried up, with the result that the season could no longer be financed in favourable conditions. Short of available purchasers, the harvests nearly rotted on the stalk.

The Lebanese put up their own money for some crop purchases, demanding, however, that the peasants accept a lower purchase price than the guaranteed tariff in order to safeguard their profit margin in a shrinking market. This was badly taken and perceived as a form of theft, all the more as radio and television networks relentlessly developed slogans against foreign speculators who were despoiling our brethren, clearly intimating that the French and the Lebanese were alone responsible for the fall in cocoa prices. The French embassy had to intervene to help calm the situation and an enraged Houphouet-Boigny had to concede during the ensuing talks that the maintenance of the agreed minimum price which had been the bedrock of his popularity since the 1950s had to be given up. Politicians who felt they could not openly hold the French responsible for the president's 'capitulation' pointed to the Lebanese as responsible for the crisis, thus fanning the spread of anti-Lebanese feeling outside Abidjan.

DO LEBANESE INDUSTRIAL INVESTMENTS REPRESENT A DANGER?

The Lebanese had always been criticized for not investing in the national economy but recently the criticism has been reversed and they are now charged with sapping the country's wealth. There are in fact about 200 industrial businesses of Lebanese origin in food, clothing, transportation, plastic products, and even in chemicals and metallurgy. These businesses are often run by third generation immigrants who do not intend to return to Lebanon and accept to take risks in the Ivorian economy. Since the sharp economic crisis of 1987 in particular, Lebanese investors have supported the collapsing real estate market and brought back the businesses of departing Frenchmen.

This new situation has brought about mixed reactions; for while the authorities are pleased with this injection of investment which has somewhat halted the trend of an ailing economy, others are deeply suspicious of the Lebanese ascendancy in industry and the possible displacement of French influence in the private sector. Damned if they do and damned if they don't, the Lebanese bear the contradictory stigma of not investing in the country, and of milking it for their own advantage when they do invest. Nor is this attitude particular to French businessmen when they charge the Lebanese with trying to extend their network of influence, and with resorting to embezzlement to do so. They even allege that French disinvestment is not the result of the crisis and of the repatriation of profits, but of unfair competition created by tax evasion on the part of Lebanese businesses.

DRUG TRAFFIC

Finally, increasing allegations are made about Lebanese drug trafficking which, it is said, centres around Abidjan. One this assertion profits go to financing the fighting militias in Lebanon and part of the Lebanese underworld has set up shop in Abidjan, thus contributing to the rise in crime among the Ivorians. Though there is a kernel of truth in this charge, it is nevertheless too easy to hold the Lebanese responsible for the increase in criminality, whose real cause is primarily the terrible deterioration in living conditions in Abidjan for the last three years. Such allegations, linked in turn to charges of terrorism, are aimed at unsettling the Lebanese community in order to make it pay up. They are also part of the scapegoat and stigmatization strategy.

Political activities of the diaspora in the Ivory Coast

Faced with becoming scapegoats by the Ivorian population and with seeing their shops looted without any police response, the Lebanese are aware of the precariousness of their position, in much the same way as were the people of diasporas in earlier periods (the Jews in the Middle Ages, the Indians in East Africa). Accordingly, their strategy is to keep on the right side of as many political candidates as possible and to make a certain number of financial contributions to 'buy' their security. They aim to make such financial support indispensible and above all irreversible. This is made easier by the greater competition between candidates in semi-open elections and by the candidates' need for campaign funds as well as the need to 'reward' voters in order to be elected.

The Lebanese thus play an important if concealed part in domestic politics and can properly be considered to be financial purveyors of political factions. In so doing they succeed in implicating Ivorian politicians collectively, including those who would otherwise be critical of them. This has resulted in considerable self-restraint on the topic on the part of the Ivorian political establishment, which in other circumstances would willingly play the populist card to expropriate the Lebanese's wealth and deflect popular dissatisfaction away from the economic crisis onto them.

Without going so far as to talk of a fusion or integration of élites, we can at least draw attention to this increasingly together interweaving of certain Lebanese and Ivorian

political candidates. But the situation has not developed as far as in Sierra Leone. The Lebanese in the Ivory Coast remain on the sidelines and are not looked upon by the country at large as political actors of any importance. Their role should nevertheless be taken into account in the event of an open succession if they were to give massive backing to a particular contender.

It is necessary to take stock of what has been said with regard to the Lebanese community's alleged responsibility in the question of terrorism. This charge has played a significant part in the stigma which has come to be attached to the community as a whole. It is necessary to enquire here into the origin of this charge, and as to whether there is any factual basis to it, how and why it has developed, whether it corresponds to the interests of certain players or whether it simply consists of an accretion of various allegations which have crystallized in the collective imagination into a fixation which seeks to victimize the Lebanese community.

A number of rumours fed by the press – and also perhaps by the intelligence networks – have pointed to the Lebanese community of Abidjan as the new permanent base of Hizbollah's attacks on French territory after the dismantling of the Hamadi networks in West Germany and Italy. The argument goes as follows: the community, often labeled as 'contaminated by fundamentalism', is a party to intra-Lebanese rivalries, or, to be more precise, to the rivalries of regional powers (Syria-Iran-Israel) in their attempt to gain the upper hand in the area. Ergo, its numbers and implantation in French-speaking countries make it a strategic asset with which to deal a blow to France by separating it from Black Africa after having done the same in the Middle East. This, the argument goes on, is part of a coherent strategy which seeks to reduce French influence and displace it by means of an Islamic radical movement whose core is the Shi'i Lebanese diaspora. On this reasoning, Iran, far from having given up its struggle against France, would merely have transferred the stakes elsewhere and presently relies on these Lebanese communities to export its ideology and deal a blow to French interests in their so-called sphere of influence. Some go even further and state that this African strategy is but a part of a wider political goal which includes the dissemination of protest within the immigrant community in France itself, as witness the controversies there around such issues as the Islamic veil and the building of mosques. The underground struggle and attempts at destabilization would, on this reasoning, not have stopped since 1986, but merely taken a different form.

While it would be irresponsible to deny the part played by some Ivorian Coast Lebanese in these events, it would be equally arbitrary simply to incriminate the whole community on account of such occurrences. The most credible hypothesis is that of a Lebanese *jihad* network which, unknown to the rest of the Lebanese community, has taken advantage of conditions in the Ivory Coast and of the structure of the diaspora to enable the passage through Abidjan of members of the organization who have relatives there.

Far from recruiting on the spot, this network would continue to operate anonymously and this includes the family connections who are not informed of the undercover activities of Lebanese immigrants. So while the network undoubtedly exists, it operates in isolation and remains unconcerned by the consequences of its actions on the Lebanese Shi'ia of Abidjna. Instead of charging them with collective complicity it is preferable to ask them to adopt the same attitude as that of the French immigrant

community in 1986, some of whose intellectuals expressed their clear disagreement with the hold-ups and in so doing were able not to play into generalized racist attitudes. A similar stance in conceivable on the part of Lebanese leaders who instead of merely burying their heads in the sand should aim to dissociate themselves from Hizbollah in order to forestall attempts on the part of certain Ivorian politicians to capitalize on xenophobic tendencies in the shadow of the officially proclaimed ideology of peaceful co-existence. The latter by not taking such tendencies into account, could well come apart in the period of transition and surprise many observers who deny the potential violence that is implicit in the situation in the Ivory Coast.

To conclude: the Lebanese are closely integrated into Ivorian society and their behaviour is fairly similar to that of other national groups. There is a patently obvious interaction between Lebanese big business, Ivorian caciques and certain French business practices. The networks include the Lebanese but not only them. The focus that has been directed at their defects, while sometimes based on tangible evidence, is essentially a function of the political strategy of certain players: Israeli services, French managers, Ivory Coast politicians. The stigma which has come to be attached to the diaspora is in danger of overtaking the aims of its own perpetrators and no one can be sure of who would be targeted for attack after an outbreak of popular wrath against the Lebanese. The French could be the next in line. It is therefore necessary to put an end to this press campaign against the people of the Lebanese diaspora without ignoring some of its activities.