

Review Article

Socio-Political Crises and Street Violence in Côte d'Ivoire: The Phenomenon of Children in "Conflict with the Law" in the Commune of ABOBO

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Abstract: Since independence, Côte d'Ivoire has been confronted with various socio-political crises. During the first crises that shook the country, the national question appeared as the search for a solution to the imbalances in the relationship between the populations living in Côte d'Ivoire. The actors in these crises were politicians and most social strata. Moreover, in recent crises, specifically the post-electoral crisis of 2010-2011, other social actors than the military were involved. Indeed, children have been recruited and enlisted into the ranks of combatants of all forces involved, despite existing laws and international law (ACAT, 2005). Gangs of children aged between 8 and 18, known by various names including 'microbes' and 'children in conflict with the law', are rife in the District of Abidjan, especially in the communes of Abobo and Anyama. Acts of violence (murders, robberies and other crimes) with knives are perpetrated on the population. As Kouamé Yao (2017) points out, the violence they perpetrate seems to be a rewriting, in an otherwise fragile context, of that perpetrated by the ziguéhis and nouchis, urban youths in search of social visibility and recognition in the 'conjunctural' Côte d'Ivoire of the post-1970s. It has been observed that during pre-electoral and post-electoral crises, these young people, known as microbes, are solicited in order to create disorder among political opponents. Despite all the measures and strategies put in place by the Ivorian state to eradicate the phenomenon, it persists and is growing. This qualitative study required the use of various sources and data collection techniques and attempts to answer the following question: Why does the phenomenon of children in conflict with the law persist? The objective of our paper is to analyse the reasons for the persistence of this phenomenon in the Ivorian capital.

Keywords: Conflict, law, crises, electoral, microbe.

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INTRODUCTION

In modern societies, urban violence is the phenomenon of an explosion of collective violence, on the fringes of cities, on the part of populations who feel disadvantaged or humiliated by institutions. Juvenile violence is a universal phenomenon but rooted in a particular socio-historical context. Most countries are confronted with this phenomenon in different forms. In fact, juvenile delinquency exists in all continents but takes on different forms. In Côte d'Ivoire, the city of Abidjan is the focus of the socio-political violence that has affected the country for more than 10 years: organised gangs commonly known as "microbes", made up of underprivileged young people between the ages of 10 and 25, sow terror.

Kouamé Y.S (2017) points out that the term microbe originated in football competitions in the 1980s between young adults and adolescents in the neighbourhoods. The former called the latter 'minus',

'microbes', in reference to their small size. When the phenomenon of gangs took hold in the school environment, the name used in connection with the term "minus" was that of virus, to show the harmful character of their action in inter-school confrontations. Later, the term 'microbes' would come to the fore again, when, after referring to the perpetrators of gang attacks by teenagers in 2012 as 'machete gangs', people, to put it simply, remembered how the youngest were called. For many people, the term 'microbe' would be particularly appropriate, especially for those under the violent assault of these gangs, as their violence was seen as a desire to petrify and putrefy the social body.

In 2011, at the end of the post-electoral crisis, Côte d'Ivoire realised that children, mostly aged between eight and seventeen, were on the streets of Abidjan with weapons. They assault, rob, terrorise and sometimes kill their victims. They act in groups, and most often under the influence of drugs. The

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Abidjanese nickname them "microbes", just like real microbes, small in size but with devastating effects. This phenomenon of real juvenile urban delinquency, although born in Abobo, has spread to other districts. These "microbes", exclusively from the disadvantaged areas of Abidjan, are minors who have dropped out of school or are illiterate, idle, disinherited or abandoned by their parents.

According to the sociologist Rodrigue Koné¹, this is a criminal gang phenomenon, such as exists in several large cities in the world. He recalls that this phenomenon is not new in Abidjan, but that the novelty lies in the influence of the recent politico-military crises. He emphasised that "it is the consequence of socio-economic marginalisation.

Some young people who are now "microbes" served in the invisible commando of Abobo, during the battle of Abidjan. After the post-election crisis, most of them did not join the regular armed forces. The modus operandi is to occupy the streets by simulating fights between them before attacking passers-by and shopkeepers. These children do not hesitate to slash or wound recalcitrant victims with knives.

A phenomenon similar to that of the 'microbes' appeared in the 1980s/1990s. These were loubards, ziguéhis and 'old fathers' from the ghetto who were solicited as henchmen for political parties. As Y. S. Kouamé (2017, p. 92) points out, 'the phenomenon of microbes has led Ivorian society to question the discrepancy between the official discourse highlighting the strength of macro-economic indicators or the success of the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process for ex-combatants, on the one hand, and a daily life marked by violence and street crime, on the other. However, to understand this particular form of criminality as being the sole product of the war and the inequalities created by the post-conflict growth policy seems reductive" and he adds that before them, the nouchis, the ziguéhis, identified and singled themselves out by the production of violence in the urban space of Abidjan. The analysis also looks at the ways in which the Nouchis, the Ziguéhis and the so-called "microbes" construct their own modes of existence on the margins, the relationship between the individual and the group, the typical forms of identity production and the particular ways in which violence is produced in the public space.

Various observations have been made about the phenomenon of microbes. Firstly, the term 'children' microbes is not age-related. In fact, within the group of microbes, there are different age groups that include

¹ Koné Fahiraman Rodrigue, sociologist at the Centre de recherches et action pour la paix, CERAP, is in charge of programmes at the NGO Freedom House on the issue of microbes

young people aged 20 to 25 and 30 to 35. And the field is invested according to the age groups. Secondly, there is a categorisation and hierarchisation of microbes (those who came from the ranks of ex-combatants during the 2011 post-election crisis, those who were informants during the crisis and those who joined these groups just out of followership, more recently, especially the younger ones). Finally, there is also an intervention in the field according to age groups, a social organisation within the microbes according to categories and an organisation of attacks in the field. Indeed, it is the youngest (i.e. those aged between 8 and 15) who are sent into the field. Being considered minors and protected by the law, they commit robberies and attacks on the population. Those between 18 and 25 years of age are sent to attack when the younger ones are in difficulty and when they are called upon during political movements.

As J. Baudryard (2018 p.142) 'Côte d'Ivoire has adopted national measures, inspired by the French system, and has ratified several international texts to ensure the protection of children². But despite all these national and international legal provisions, the situation of the child in Côte d'Ivoire continues to suffer significant deterioration. The growth of the phenomenon of child microbes attests to this. Five ministries are currently involved in the fight against this form of juvenile delinquency. But it is difficult for these ministries involved in the same cause to identify this profile of children under the same name, which is likely to cause inconsistency and inefficiency in the actions taken. Indeed, for the Ministry for the Promotion of the Family, Women and Children, the "microbe" child is a child in difficulty. For the Ministry of National Education, it is "a child in danger". For the Ministry of Social Affairs, it is "a child in the process of radicalisation". For the Ministry of Justice, it is "a child in conflict with the law". For the Ministry of the Interior, it is "a dangerous child". Police repression by the latter ministry does not prevent the rise of this juvenile urban violence. On the contrary, it feeds it. Despite the repressive policy, groups of 'microbe' children are multiplying in the city of Abidjan. Some 'microbe' children, as soon as they are captured, come out of prison more determined and violent than before.

It is this persistence of the phenomenon that constitutes the object of our study. What are the reasons for the persistence of the microbe phenomenon in the commune of Abobo?

² African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. A National Committee was established in 2001 to combat child trafficking and exploitation and to provide care for victims. In 2015, school was made free and compulsory for children and adolescents aged 6 to 16. At the health level, intensive campaigns to popularise child immunisation are also conducted

Our study was part of a qualitative approach and took place in three neighbourhoods of the Abobo commune (Clouetcha, Agbeikoi and Marley) in 2016 and 2019. The people surveyed were community leaders from the three neighbourhoods investigated, police officers, social workers and specialised educators, and microbe children. Data collection techniques such as documentary research, direct observation, in-depth interviews (in face-to-face situations) with microbes and their "big brothers" and group interviews with young microbes (2nd generation, i.e. 20 to 25 years old) were used.

1. The different socio-political crises in Côte d'Ivoire

The socio-political crisis in Côte d'Ivoire can then be defined as the set of events that compromise the continuity of the state and the social order, thereby introducing a break in a relatively long period of political stability in a country that has long been considered a model. (F. Akindès, 2019).

In its history, Côte d'Ivoire has experienced various socio-political crises, the most notable of which are those of 1999, 2002 and 2010-2011: the 1999 coup d'état, the September 2002 crisis and the post-electoral crisis of 2010-2011.

With the coup d'état of 24 December 1999 and the politico-military conflict that began on 19 September 2002, Côte d'Ivoire broke with a tradition of political stability that had made it a model in the West African sub-region. It is going through an unprecedented socio-political crisis which not only compromises the continuity of the state, but also releases a charge of violence in the social body. (F. Akindès, 2019).

The post-electoral crisis of 2010-2011 will be the most significant. Indeed, according to M. Fofana (2011, p.161) 'the presidential election of 28 November 2010 was expected by Ivorians and the international community as a way out of the long politico-military crisis that began on 19 September 2002. However, this election in fact gave rise to a particularly violent post-electoral crisis between the armed forces supporting the two presidents (Alassane Ouattara and Laurent Gbagbo), one of whom was declared the winner by the IEC (Independent Electoral Commission), the other by the Constitutional Council. After the polarisation of political forces between the pro-Ouattara RHDP (Rassemblement des houphouëtistes pour la démocratie et la paix) and the pro-Gbagbo LMP (La Majorité Présidentielle) during the electoral campaign, this unprecedented situation of "two presidents for one country" precipitated an armed confrontation between the two camps.

It was during the post-election crisis of 2010-2011 that the phenomenon of microbes appeared. At

that time, the communes of Abobo and Anyama contained the bases of the invisible commando, a subsidiary of the New Forces. This commando enlisted young people and children who fought in the post-election crisis and after the crisis, a form of urban violence was born in the commune of Abobo.

2. Urban violence and the different forms of urban youth gangs that have appeared in Côte d'Ivoire

Like most African countries, Côte d'Ivoire is confronted with forms of urban violence that have evolved over the years. I. Touré and N. Kouamé (1994) note that urban violence, because of the characteristics of the city, is a normal social fact and above all consubstantial with the cosmopolitanism of a city like Abidjan. Indeed, Abidjan, the socio-cultural and socio-economic hub of the West African sub-region, has long been considered the mirror of Africa, and Côte d'Ivoire one of the leaders of Africa's winners. They add that Abidjan has experienced and continues to experience more and more cracks, fault lines and points of rupture that lead, among certain social actors whose numbers are constantly increasing, to acts that are the manifestation of violence at different stages of its evolution and which, because they seriously undermine the city's security credentials, threaten it with an implosion.

Indeed, the urban fabric of Abidjan as it has been built could not fail to generate its deviants, its marginalized, its weak, its oppressed, its excluded, who are found at all levels of social life: economic, cultural and political and in all walks of life. And in order to survive, if they cannot adapt to the system, their only weapon, their last resort, is violence.

This violence manifests itself in different ways: theft can range from simple larceny to aggravated theft such as armed robbery, burglary, robbery in a group, assault on the public highway, robbery; from simple theft without violence to murder, which is increasingly frequent, in order to seize other people's property.

Like most African countries, Côte d'Ivoire is confronted with forms of urban violence that have evolved over the years. Indeed, the nouchis and ziguéhis of Abidjan in the 1970s and 1980s were the precursors of youth gang crime. Nouchi, Ivorian slang, appeared in the working-class districts of Abidjan. The origin of this language: school dropouts, bandits and ziguéhis (warriors in Bété). Another category of urban violence emanates from child soldiers and child microbes.

3. Child soldiers and child microbes

In the African context, interest in the issue of child soldiers is relatively recent. In the 1990s, sub-Saharan Africa was marked by a long series of civil conflicts (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Burundi,

Rwanda, 'Congo-Brazzaville', 'Congo-Kinshasa', Sudan, etc.). The massive use of child soldiers is one of the major characteristics of these African crises. (J.H. Jézéquel, 2006).

Côte d'Ivoire has also experienced armed and civil conflicts. As in most African armed conflicts, in Côte d'Ivoire children have been recruited and enlisted into the ranks of combatants of all the forces involved, despite the laws in force and international law (ACAT, 2005).

Baudryard J. (2018: 141) states that 'the path of these "microbe" children is generally identical. From wandering 'street children', they were recruited by adults as child soldiers, ammunition carriers for combatants or informers, during the post-election war of 2010-2011. They experienced the atrocities of war first-hand and saw adults cross the moral boundaries they themselves had set. These children became convinced that it is normal and possible to get what you want through force and violence. At the end of the war, they are once again left to their own devices, abandoned by the adults who enlisted them, but also by the state. Indeed, they do not benefit from the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme, reserved exclusively for adult combatants. In order to survive on a daily basis, these children will take advantage of the disinhibition they have acquired during the war years. Or they will be used as 'henchmen' by influential politicians or businessmen who navigate the underground economy of the mafia, drugs, or even traditional ritual trafficking.

Thus, the Ivorian rebel movements have also engaged in the systematic recruitment of children. Child soldiers have mostly become so-called microbe children in the commune of Abobo. As Koffi-Dja (2017: 3) points out, 'Indeed, since the late 1960s, Abobo has had various nicknames that are supposed to reflect the social, economic or political situation prevailing there: "Abobo-la-Guerre", "Abobo-Bagdad-City" or even more recently "Abobo la martyre". The evolution of the name of this commune reveals a constant in the imagination: Abobo seems to represent one of the main epicentres of violence in Abidjan, with the phenomenon of the 'microbes'. She adds that it is widely accepted among the population that it is in the commune of Abobo that this phenomenon is best structured and established, before spreading to other areas of the Abidjan urban area and beyond. As mentioned above, strategies to combat the phenomenon have not been able to stop it. There are a number of reasons that could explain the persistence of this phenomenon.

4. The reasons for the persistence of the phenomenon

There are various reasons for the persistence of the "microbe" phenomenon

4.1. A social crisis, a culture of violence in the commune of Abobo

The population of Abobo is among the most economically fragile in the country. The unemployment rate is particularly high (20% in 2011 for example)³ compared to national figures (11% for the country as a whole and 13% for urban areas in 2011). (Interpeace, 2017) Abobo in particular is characterised by a precarious social fabric. Its population is among the most economically fragile in the country. The unemployment rate is particularly high (20% in 2011 for example) compared to national figures (11% for the country as a whole and 13% for urban areas in 2011) according to AGEPE (2013). Moreover, these official figures include particularly precarious jobs (casual, below the minimum wage and informal). Young people are the first to be affected by unemployment and precarious employment. (Koffi-Dja, 2017)

Thus, without qualifications or capital to start an informal activity like their parents (apart from the small jobs of shoeshine boys or hawkers), or judging that the apprenticeship time is too long and not very rewarding with certain craftsmen (car mechanics, sheet metal workers, carpenters, hairdressers, etc.), many young people turn to illegal and lucrative businesses. Thus, Abobo has become the seat of an economy of violence, organised around the trafficking of psychotropic substances and other illegal goods (counterfeits, gold, etc.). In Abobo, there are several hundred places where drugs are consumed and sold, known as "fumeurs". The leaders of these trafficking operations recruit and mobilise young people in gangs, including the so-called "microbes", to secure the sites and market and consume the products. Furthermore, the transport sector, the only truly developed economic sector in the commune, is the hub of all the trafficking and violent power struggles in the face of the financial manna generated. Young people flock to this sector. A significant proportion of young people known as 'microbes' work in this sector as auxiliaries. (Interpeace, 2017).

4.2 Political crises as a factor in the persistence of the phenomenon

There is a correlation between socio-political crises and the microbial phenomenon. Indeed, these young people and children are used during political conflicts. The population is attacked during political marches or demonstrations by 'microbes'. However, the first generations of microbes, i.e. those aged between 8 and 15, do not take the field during political

³ Unemployment is particularly high in urban areas. For example, the unemployment rate in 2012 was 15.2% for urban areas, and 3.8% for rural areas. Unemployment was particularly high in Abidjan, with a rate of 19.5% in the same year. Agence d'Études et de Promotion de l'Emploi (AGEPE), Situation de l'emploi en Côte d'Ivoire en 2012, July 2013.

demonstrations. Rather, the second generation (18 to 25 years old) or the third generation (25 to 35 years old) of microbes. There is a diversification of microbes and an organisation of attacks on the ground during political demonstrations. There is thus a diversification and organisation of microbes during political crises. Older microbes take the field when political demonstrations are more violent.

4.3 An identity crisis and social belonging

In addition to this violent behaviour, the phenomenon of microbial children presents an identity crisis and a sense of belonging to a social group. Indeed, a label has been given to the microbe children by the population. The Abidjanese population expresses feelings of rejection and hostility towards them. It often happens that the population takes justice into its own hands by physically eliminating certain children deemed dangerous. Moreover, the institutions not only identify them as children in social disarray (i.e. no longer part of society with its institutions) but also disagree about the status of the child. In fact, the term microbes covers young people over 18 years of age who are adults.

This social exclusion of microbe children leads to their dehumanisation, withdrawal and positioning on the margins of society. Thus, in the face of rejection, the children reconstruct their identity on the street. According to Hérault (2013), the street has become a market: transactions, canvassing, hawking flourish there, but also prostitution, drugs, aggression, theft and crime of all kinds. The street has become an outlet, an alternative that fascinates, the street has become the breeding ground of a new culture that, depending on the place, coexists with or outright supplants the usual social spaces, those of the home, the family, tradition and institutions. Urban youth are at the heart of this change, and are one of the actors but also, all too often, the victims. For the past decade or two, we have witnessed the alarming development of the phenomenon of street children: the street inhabits the young and the young inhabit the street.

Thus, there is a quest for social recognition among young people and microbe children. The group

represents an opportunity for these young people to "become someone" and to affirm a new social belonging, a re-socialisation and a new social identity. And during political crises, this new identity is legitimised and valued by politicians who call on them to stir up trouble among the population or their supporters.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the microbial phenomenon involves social, political and identity crises.

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