

# The Law and Ivoirian Women

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## Introduction

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## Introduction

The knowledge and use of the law which some women in the Ivory Coast have demonstrated reflect important realities about their position as women and as ethnic group members in Ivoirian society. Although the Ivory Coast has had a unitary legal code since 1964, there has not been uniform awareness of this code by the Ivoirian citizenry. Differential knowledge of and reliance on the legal code is evident among women in one urban area. One ethnic group's women seem more aware of and comfortable with the law than do their counterparts of another ethnic group. Women from the one ethnic group appear to employ the law defensively in their own behalf; women from the other ethnic group do not. These differences and the reasons for them will be explored here.

The concern of this paper is Ivoirian civil law as it relates to women, with particular reference to marriage and family. How do the laws pertain to women? What does the law say about such things as polygyny, bridewealth

payment, divorce, and inheritance? To what extent are women aware of the legal code? To what extent do they uphold or manipulate the law if they know of its existence? What effect do socio-economic and/or ethnic factors have on women's legal position and legal knowledge?

Data for this investigation come from fieldwork done with members of two ethnic groups, Dioula and Bété, in the city of Gagnoa, Ivory Coast.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of Dioula are Moslem. They are a patrilineal, Mande people from the north. The Bété are a Kru population, patrilineal, and largely Catholic. They originally come from the west and have lived in the Gagnoa region for several hundred years. Although the town of Gagnoa began as a French outpost in a small Bété village, the Dioula immigrated soon thereafter and both groups have been in the town for seventy years. In fact, the 1970 Dioula population of Gagnoa was twice as large as the town's Bété population. This demographic pattern of rapid growth and heterogeneous population with non-indigenous predominance is typical of secondary towns in the Ivory Coast and is the main reason Gagnoa was chosen as the research site.

While all people in the Ivory Coast have had some opportunity to become familiar with and live by the new laws, it appears that the

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