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Muslim society and the Ouattara regime in Côte d'Ivoire

Partial elective affinities

The rise to power in 2011 of a president from a Muslim Malinké lineage has begun a new chapter in the formerly turbulent relationship between Islam and the state. The leading imams in Abidjan, at the helm of national Islamic organisations, are intimately close to power and regularly called upon for their advice. In return, they amass a variety of generous benefits. Many cadres from Islamic associations have risen up the regime hierarchy. The imams no longer denounce the failings of the authorities with quite such ardency, while community redistribution has simultaneously ground to a halt. While the social hardships of the Muslim majority remain very real, protest rumbles on, but outside the register of 'radicalisation'.

The pendulum of history: A decline in religious tensions.

For the first time in its history, since 2011 Côte d'Ivoire has been led by a Muslim head of state. A former deputy managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), married to a French Catholic, Alassane Ouattara has appointed Christian and Muslim religious figures to several major state institutions, including the Independent Electoral Commission. He has paid official visits to Saudi Arabia, the Vatican, and Israel. His government contributes to funding pilgrimages by Muslims to Mecca, Catholics to Lourdes, and Protestants and Evangelicals to the Holy Land. This policy is reminiscent of the ecumenical approach taken by father of the nation Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who held a philoclerical conception of constitutional secularism closer to

the Anglo-Saxon than the French model.

Houphouët's death in late 1993, and the worsening economic crisis, sounded the death knell for a Côte d'Ivoire that aspired to development with a certain degree of tolerance and hospitality, and within which Muslims, including migrants from ECOWAS¹ countries, especially from Burkina Faso, were relatively well integrated. The fierce political struggle between Houphouët's successors gave rise to the nationalist ideology known as 'ivoirité' (Ivorianness). In order to exclude the candidacy of Alassane Ouattara—Houphouët's former prime minister—the 'ethno-nationalist' policy launched by Henri Konan Bédié (1994-99) and continued by General Robert Guei (1999-2000), then Laurent Gbagbo (2000-10), adopted and exaggerated the characterisation of Muslims—also known by the generic term 'Dyula'²—as foreigners, or even as the nation's enemies, thereby discriminating en masse against a large section of the population. The violence intensified with the election of Laurent Gbagbo in October 2000, with the unprecedented discovery of a mass grave including fifty-seven bodies identified as 'Dyula'

in Yopougon (an area of Abidjan), attributed by the United Nations (UN) to pro-Gbagbo police forces. On 19 September 2002, rebels from the north of the country, with support from Burkina Faso, attempted a coup against the regime in power.

Over the next eight years, Côte d'Ivoire was divided between a pro-government South that remained under President Gbagbo's control, and a rebel North controlled by the Forces nouvelles (New Forces) led by Guillaume Soro—a Senufo Catholic. Having converted to Pentecostalism along with his wife in 1998, Gbagbo and his evangelical and patriotic supporters equated the rebellion and opposition parties to the devil working against Jesus' plan to turn Côte d'Ivoire into a New Jerusalem. Violence resurfaced forcefully after Gbagbo challenged the results of the 2010 presidential election, which was won by Ouattara. Mosques were attacked, imams murdered, and Muslims burned alive. All the evidence suggests that the most bellicose individuals in the former president's inner circle were seeking to tip a political and electoral conflict into a religious war (Miran-Guyon, 2015).



© Marie Miran-Guyon, 23 December 2015³.

Geodemographic data

Côte d'Ivoire is a multi-denominational country with 42.9% Muslims, 33.9% Christians—all churches combined—and a significant proportion of followers of traditional or 'animistic' religions (INS, 2014). Among non-nationals, who represent 24.2% of the resident population, 72% are Muslims. Conversions and overlapping beliefs are frequent and tolerated. Practitioners of various religions live peacefully together within many families. At the end of the nineteenth century, the presence of Islam was limited to the Sudanese-Sahelian North, which was predominantly animist at the time. The colonial plantation economy favoured the development of the forestry-oriented South, along with a sustained flow of North-South migration. Today, 75% of Muslims live in the South, compared to 25% in the North. The image of a Côte d'Ivoire divided between a Christian and animist South and a Muslim North is a misleading shortcut.

Emergence of a new national Muslim leadership.

For many years, the Muslims of the Ivorian savannah were more concerned with commerce than politics, accommodating 'infidel' authorities, and rejecting *jihad* by the sword in order to better devote themselves to Koranic education and pious practices⁴. Today's Muslim elite claim this legacy of an Islam of peace—completely at odds with an Islam of hegemonic conquest—which they see as having practiced what they characterise as a form of secularism before its time. The most significant transformation of the Islamic elite arose from the confluence, in the 1970s and 1980s, of a Western-educated, French-speaking, urban Muslim youth—mainly from Abidjan—with a handful of Arabic-speaking reformist preachers trained in the Arab-Islamic world. This latter group included Sheikh Aboubacar [Boikary] Fofana, who trained in Egypt, was close to the so-called 'Sunni' movement (Wahhabi or Salafist⁵) during

his youth, and was subsequently a follower of the Sufi Qadiriyya order.

This new elite was anxious to overcome the ethno-regional, social, generational, and doctrinal differences within Muslim society, in order to better respond to the challenge of Islam's meeting with modernity, and bring Islam into the public sphere more effectively, implicitly inspired by the *modus operandi* of the Ivorian Catholic Church. Two affiliated federations were created in the early 1990s, the Conseil supérieur des imams (Senior Council of Imams, COSIM), the chief body of Ivorian Islam, which has no equivalent elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, and the Conseil national islamique (National Islamic Council, CNI), which is now losing impetus for reasons related to its leadership. Since 2006 Sheikh Aboubacar Fofana has been the chairman of COSIM and *Sheikh al-aima* (i.e. 'Sheikh of the imams', an invented title), making him the 'official' voice of Islam in Côte d'Ivoire.

Muslim diversity:

Convergences and tensions.

Muslim communities remain diverse, especially in terms of doctrine. The so-called 'Sunni' (Salafist) community is well-organised, with the Association des musulmans sunnites de Côte d'Ivoire (Sunni Muslim Association of Côte d'Ivoire, AMSCI) and the Conseil des imams sunnites (Council of Sunni Imams, CODIS, modelled on COSIM). Since the 2000s, after twenty years of pullback caused by intra-Sunni conflicts, this community has once again become active in the community sector, with a combination of educational, social, and proselytising projects, including some aimed at women. The Al-Fourqane Islamic University in Yopougon is an initiative from the NGO *Maktab Ta'Awoun* ('Cooperation Bureau') of Fadiga Moussa Al-Farouk, who

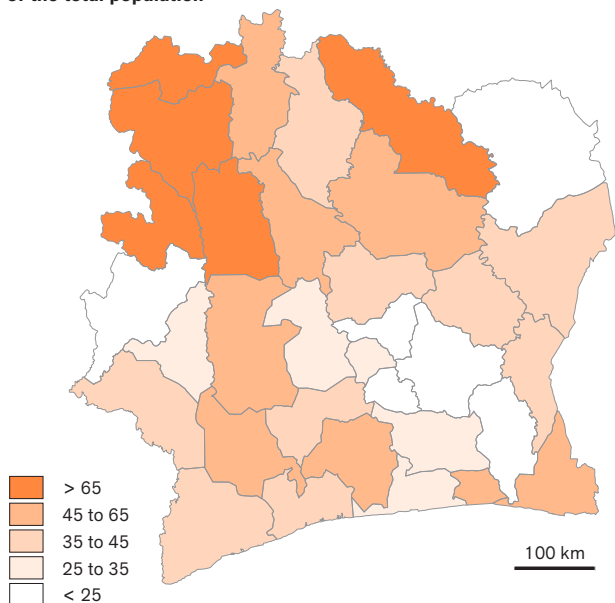
is also *rais* of AMSCI. The Sunni community receives funding from the Gulf states, as does COSIM, albeit to a lesser extent⁶. More Arabic-speaking than French-speaking, its leadership is now seeking to assert itself on the public stage. It has long been lagging behind in political affairs, but nonetheless has made its respect for constitutional legality clear (Madore, 2016).

The Sunni movement remains diverse, and in the city of Man is also violently divided internally. Since 2015, brutal altercations have led to looting of the premises of the local Sunni radio station, based in Man, and the AMSCI regional office, as well as the closure of the Sunni mosque in the Domoraud district by departmental authorities. Recalling the intra-Sunni feuds of the 1980s, in an area weakened by ten years of poor governance by the Forces nouvelles, this serious and as yet unresolved conflict revolves around issues of leadership, income from resources, and the national origin of enemy brothers—primarily of Guinean origin, on the one hand, and Mahouka (Ivorians from Touba), on the other⁷. Muslims may have suffered the wrath of ivoirité, but they also harbour their own ethno-nationalist tensions (Miran-Guyon, 2016a). This conflict has been further mired in political distortions internal to the ruling RHDP coalition, arising from tensions between the RDR and UDPCI, but also within the RDR itself⁸.

Furthermore, since the 2000s, a resurgence of mystical brotherhoods (*tariqas*), particularly those inspired by Tijani Sufism, has favoured the rise of a young generation of sheikhs and caliphs, organised in competing circles. Although popular, these leaders do not have the same power as Senegalese sheikhs, but are challenging the position of their Sunni detractors. The Maouloud celebration

Côte d'Ivoire, a multi-denominational country

Distribution of Muslims by administrative region, as a percentage of the total population



Source : Institut National de la Statistique (National Institute of Statistics, INS) according to the RGPH 2014; the *Afrique contemporaine* journal and EdiCarto, 2018.

EdiCarto, 06/2018.

(*Mawlid al-Nabi*), commemorating the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad and condemned by Sunnis as a reprehensible innovation (*bid'a*), has been growing for over a decade. It results in a significant number of the faithful travelling from the urban centres of the South to their parents' regions of origin, much as with Easter celebrations, known as 'Pâquinou', in Baoulé Catholic communities: an opportunity to create or strengthen bonds of material and symbolic solidarity between young people born in the South and a large family remaining in the North. In Kéлиндjan, near Odienné, Maouloud is celebrated by the old Sheikh Matié Boiké [Aboubakar Samassi]—renowned for the effectiveness of his *baraka* (grace)—and now attracts the most senior RDR leaders with origins in the Kabadougou region (Binaté, 2017). Despite their disagreements, Sufis and Sunnis nevertheless collaborate

with COSIM, at the very least in announcing the dates of Islamic festivals. Since 2014, new tensions have arisen between COSIM and the Shiite community, for reasons that are unclear, probably relating to local circumstances rather than the background deterioration in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Côte d'Ivoire is home to West Africa's largest Lebanese community, which is mainly Shiite. This community, which dominates the country's retail trade, is internally divided and leads a largely self-contained life, with Arabic as its language of communication, including in its Islamic schools and mosques, a language that few Ivorians understand. The main Lebanese Shiite community—which centres around the imposing Fatima Al-Zahra mosque in Marcory—financially supports Hassan Nasrallah's Hezbollah, arguing that their nationalist commitment to Lebanon has

nothing to do with Côte d'Ivoire (Institute for Security Studies, 2014). Independently, in 1999 Iran founded a small Shia centre, which has become a *hawza* (university). As COSIM has put a damper on its relations in the Shia world, a small group of African Shiites (neither Arab nor Persian) created its own Conseil Ahlul Beit de Côte d'Ivoire (Ahlul Bayt Council of Côte d'Ivoire) in 2016⁹.

Widening social inequality.

But the greatest tensions harming the Muslim community are of a different kind. The Muslim majority has come to shape opinion, particularly since the rise to power of 'big brother' Ouattara, in view of which its imams, cadres, and intellectuals, especially those based in Abidjan's affluent neighbourhoods, such as Cocody, have embarked on a scramble for subsidies and lucrative positions. This is not an unfounded allegation: a serious case of financial misconduct has put a close ally of Sheikh Aboubacar Fofana in prison. For each major festival, COSIM recommends a general theme, which the imams are invited to take up in their sermons across the country's mosques. This theme is presented during a keynote lecture at the Riviera Golf mosque, which is usually attended by President Ouattara and his Muslim ministers, and broadcast live on RTI, the public television channel. In June 2017, for the Night of Destiny (*Laylat al-Qadr*), COSIM bravely proposed the theme 'Islam's contribution to the fight against the scourge of illicit enrichment'. Imam Ousmane Diakité, national executive secretary of COSIM, delivered the keynote lecture in the presence of the president and an audience of ministers: 'When we look at society today, it's a scramble for riches. [...] There is embezzlement [...], those who manipulate public and private markets [...], the abuse of office [...], influence peddling

[...], we are increasingly promoting people who have never worked, but who have become billionaires and whom we worship in society. It is the promotion of wrongful values. [...] There is also impunity. If you fail to punish corruption and those who illegally enrich themselves, you are simply encouraging others. [...] [But understand that it is impossible to] spiritually cleanse dirty money. Even if you build mosques and send people to Mecca with that money, it will never be clean in the eyes of God'¹⁰. The president's spokesman, minister and businessman Hamed Bakayoko—also a Freemason Grand Master at the Grand Lodge of Côte d'Ivoire¹¹—then took the floor to thank the imams for their prayers for Côte d'Ivoire. True to custom, he handed them a cheque for five million CFA francs, which he referred to, not without humour, as 'lawful money', prompting laughter from the audience.¹² In November 2017, a host of personalities, including Prime Minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly and the COSIM chairman, attended a ceremony to thank minister Ibrahim Baongo Cissé for having financed the refurbishment of the Grand Mosque at Koumassi and the reconstruction of the adjoining denominational school using his own personal funds¹³. Baongo Cissé, member of parliament for Koumassi, also financed the renovation of the Catholic church Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption in Koumassi Prodomo¹⁴. In October 2017, at the Alamy Toungara mosque in Abobo, sixteen pilgrims returning from Mecca thanked Adama Toungara, former energy and oil minister and mayor of Abobo, for funding their Hajj¹⁵. The young and the underprivileged criticise Muslim community leaders for failing to redistribute enough wealth¹⁶, wanting to hang on to their positions, and ignoring the social realities of those at

the bottom. These realities are indeed alarming. While poverty is not specific to Muslims, it detrimentally affects Malinké families, and a fair share of young people, including (albeit not exclusively) those who have attended Koranic school. Young offenders known as 'microbes' (germs) or officially 'children in conflict with the law'—a phenomenon seen in Abobo, the former stronghold of the RDR, following the post-election crisis—primarily come from Muslim 'Dyula' circles—and those who are not, sometimes pose as Dyulas¹⁷. In 2017, and in the recent past, around 80% of inmates at the prison in Abidjan (MACA) came from Muslim backgrounds¹⁸. In *Nouchi*—Ivorian urban slang—MACA is known as the 'Kaaba' (Le Marcis, 2014, p. 11)¹⁹. 'Adventurers', the illegal migrants who leave Côte d'Ivoire for Europe via Libya, or head elsewhere, are mostly Malinké and other Muslims, some disappointed by the meagre social rewards from the growth touted by a government that they believe themselves to have collectively helped into power (see box below)²⁰. As of 2018, these underprivileged Muslim circles are not experiencing jihadist-type 'radicalisation', but Muslim and political authorities are alarmed by the danger they represent. The state has launched a resocialisation programme for the so-called 'microbes' and is seeking to raise awareness about the dangers of illegal migration. As for COSIM, the institutionalisation of solidarity remains its greatest weakness.

Document - Young Ivorian Muslims and irregular migration since 2015

According to the 'Ivorian Migrants Profile Report 2017' (IOM Côte d'Ivoire 2018), 10,000 migrants claiming to be 'Ivorian' arrived in Italy illegally in 2017 (compared to 13,000

in 2016, representing a 230% increase on 2015)²¹. According to the report 'Migration irrégulière en Côte d'Ivoire: Logique sociale et stratégie des retournés d'Anyama et de Daloa' (Illegal migration in Côte d'Ivoire: Social logic and strategy of Anyama and Daloa returnees; Koné, N'Goran, 2017), '[t]he majority of migrants encountered [during the study] claimed to belong to the Malinké ethnic group. This ethnic group accounts for 75% of respondents [...]. The remaining 25% are distributed between the Senufo (10%) and ECOWAS nationals (15%). Religion is the common denominator of all returned migrants. They all claim to be of the Muslim faith' (p. 15). 'In the case of Daloa [the main city of departure for illegal migrants], I can tell you that 99.99% of those involved are young Dyula', said a municipal representative' (p. 21). 'The Malinké community, from which most of those considering illegal migration come from, is considered to be close to the current ruling power. Many of the young people we met feel they have been forgotten by a ruling power that they supported during the presidential elections and the subsequent post-election crisis of 2010' (p. 20). 'Despite the likelihood of death, those who embark on dangerous migration observe all spiritual provisions for the success of their new life. [...] Far from the popular discourse that denounces the recklessness of young people, this risk-taking is calculated. It is preceded by a spiritual commitment that aims to secure psychological assurance and attract good luck, in the form of *douahous* [*du'a*' in Arabic, meaning a prayer of supplication], to use the Malinké term. And if death should befall them, if the journey were to fail, it is but God's will. The religious anchoring of the

decision to migrate profoundly recasts the notion of risk and its perception among young people' (pp. 30–31).

Grand-Bassam: Jihad from elsewhere.

On 13 March 2016, an attack claimed by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) killed nineteen people on a beach in Grand-Bassam. This unprecedented event was condemned by all Ivorian parties, including Muslims on all sides. All called for a surge in national unity in support of the government, including Laurent Gbagbo from the International Criminal Court (ICC) prison. The attack was immediately perceived as promoted from abroad, and public opinion did not link it to Ivorian Muslims. Investigations subsequently showed that the three attackers were Malians—rather than two Malians and one Ivorian—and that they left for Bamako by airplane on the very same day of the attack (Guichaoua, Koné, 2016; Assemblée nationale, 2016, p. 119–122). Northern Côte d'Ivoire, with its greater levels of poverty, porous borders, the movement of itinerant preachers, and *talibé* children living in poor conditions in traditional Koranic schools, could be a fragile area faced with the temptation of jihad. Still, the greatest danger of armed destabilisation in 2017 remained mutineering or demobilised Forces nouvelles veterans, the vast majority of whom were Muslim northerners. At the end of April 2017, Sheikh Aboubacar Fofana and a COSIM delegation went on a mission to Bouaké to negotiate with the mutineers for another delay in payment or cancellation of the remainder of the bonuses promised to them in January, in order to relieve state finances struggling with the decline in cocoa prices. They were received but curtly advised not to interfere in such matters²². As with the

2002 conflict, the 2017 mutinies had absolutely nothing to do with any Islamic cause whatsoever.

Marie Miran-Guyon²³

1. Economic Community of West African States.
2. Dyula literally means 'travelling trader' in Malinké. Used in the context of migration since colonial times, the term has taken on an exogenous (and recently pejorative) connotation, referring without distinction to all Muslim northerners who are not native to the southern forestry region, whether or not they are Malinké.
3. An embrace between President Alassane Ouattara and the chairman of the Côte d'Ivoire Conseil supérieur des imams (Senior Council of Imams, COSIM), Sheikh Aboubacar Fofana, at the Riviera Golf mosque in Abidjan, during the 2015 Maouloud Festival. On the occasion of every major Muslim festival, COSIM hosts a lecture on a given subject, which is suggested to all of the country's imams as a topic for preaching. The lecture delivered at the Golf Mosque includes President Ouattara and his Muslim ministers among its usual audience and is broadcast live on television. This embrace demonstrates the warm relations between the leading imams and the ruling power.
4. Samori Ture's passage through the region, including the destruction of Kong in 1897, left bad memories.
5. Regarding these close but not strictly synonymous terms, see for instance Ostebo, 2015.
6. This funding is hard to document, and we must undoubtedly guard against overstating it. For a comprehensive study of Saudi involvement in Africa, see Pérouse de Montclos, 2018.
7. Interviews with Mamadou Bamba and Joseph Baya based in Man, December 2017.
8. Rassemblement des houphouëtistes pour la démocratie et la paix (Rally of Houphouëtists for Democracy and Peace); Rassemblement des républicains (Rally of the Republicans); Union pour la démocratie et la paix en Côte d'Ivoire (Union for Democracy and Peace in Côte d'Ivoire).
9. Interview with Imam Abdul Kader Doumbia, 29 August 2016.

10. The full transcript can be found at <http://www.afrikipresse.fr/societe/un-imam-ivoirien-denonce-onvenere-des-milliardaires-qui-n-ontjamais-travaille>. In relation to corruption, see also Bishop Koné, p. 245.

11. See interview with Francis Akindès, p. 325.

12. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzTbi9XpG-o>

13. See: <https://news.abidjan.net/h/626436.html>, 24 November 2017. On the 2012 scandal surrounding the refurbishment of public universities (the cost of which rose from 47 to more than 100 billion CFA francs), tarnishing Baongo Cissé, who was Minister of Higher Education at the time, see *L'Éléphant déchainé*, 10 August 2012.

14. See: <https://news.abidjan.net/h/627936.html>, 20 December 2017.

15. See *L'Intelligent d'Abidjan*, 12 October 2017, <https://news.abidjan.net/h/624002.html>.

16. The Zakat & Waqf Foundation, established with the aim of collecting charitable alms and funding charities, which was launched in 2010 amid great fanfare, remains at a standstill.

17. In May 2016, a police operation known as 'Épervier' (Sparrowhawk) rounded up 250 young offenders. For Zoumanan Sanogo, who went to police headquarters at Le Plateau and met relatives of those detained, '90% of the minors held as alleged "Microbes" belonged to my community'. 'Imams have rallied against the "Microbes" phenomenon because they know that almost all of these young thugs come from families known as Muslim'.

Statements quoted by Foua Ernest de Saint-Sauveur (http://www.guillaumesoro.ci/tribune-internationale/phenomene-des-laquo-microbes-raquo-quel-message-faut-il-y-voir_8473_1465557789.html, 10 June 2016).

18. Interview with the Imam at MACA, Ibrahim Bredji, 29 December 2016 (see Miran-Guyon, 2016b). Imam Bredji died in February 2017. These facts require further investigation.

19. See also the article by Frédéric Le Marcis, p. 85. Please note however that 'Kaaba', or rather 'caba', is actually an abbreviation for 'cabanon', a long-time nickname for the MACA prison.

20. Conversations held over a long period of time with Ibrahim Sy Savané and Mokodou Thiam, Côte d'Ivoire's ambassador to Libya since 2011. According to a study by an Italian NGO, '95% of those considering immigration are Malinké, commonly known as 'Dyulas' [...]. They are also 90% illiterate or school drop-outs and identify as Muslim' (AFP, 24 April 2018).

21. See the 'Focus' article by Sy Savané, p. 255. According to a community youth leader in Daloa, who is also in charge of an outreach project with an Italian NGO, 'these figures represent one-tenth of all illegal immigrants from the Daloa region', the main point of departure for Libya. 'Before arriving in Italy via Libya, many migrants have perished at sea or in the desert. Others have been put in prison or some have simply been reported missing' (AFP, 24 April 2018).

22. *Le Patriote*, 26 April 2017. In relation to the army and its tensions, see the interview with Bruno Clément-Bollée, p. 281.

23. Marie Miran-Guyon is a senior lecturer in history and anthropology (EHESS, PSL, and IMAF).

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