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► **To cite this version:**

Marie Miran-Guyon, Francis Akindès. FREEMASONRY IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE, A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CURRENT ISSUES Interview with Francis Akindès Francis Akindès,. Afrique Contemporaine, 2017, 263-264, pp.325-338. halshs-03918962

**HAL Id: halshs-03918962**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03918962v1>**

Submitted on 17 Jan 2023

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## FREEMASONRY IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE, A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CURRENT ISSUES

Interview with Francis Akindès

Francis Akindès, interview by Marie Miran-Guyon

De Boeck Supérieur | « [Afrique contemporaine](#) »

2017/3 No 263-264 | pages 325 - 338

ISSN 0002-0478

ISBN 9782807390881

This document is the English version of:

Francis Akindès, Interview by Marie Miran-Guyon « La franc-maçonnerie en Côte d'Ivoire, brève histoire des enjeux actuels », *Afrique contemporaine* 2017/3 (No 263-264), p. 325-338.

Available online at :

[https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E\\_AFCO\\_263\\_0325--freemasonry-in-cote-d-ivoire-a-brief.htm](https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_AFCO_263_0325--freemasonry-in-cote-d-ivoire-a-brief.htm)

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# Freemasonry in Côte d'Ivoire, a brief history of current issues

## Interview with Francis Akindès

Freemasonry, a secret initiatory society, remains largely unknown in Côte d'Ivoire as in most of Africa. Moral clichés, closed-mindedness, and scandal mongering have painted a prejudicial portrait that is often detached from reality. A look back at the history of Masonic obediences in Côte d'Ivoire and on their special relationship with the colonial and post-colonial state and with the Church provides a more nuanced understanding of the current issues involving multiple and competing lodges. This interview was conducted with sociologist Francis Akindès<sup>1</sup>.

### The many faces of Freemasonry: A look back at colonial history

**Marie Miran-Guyon [MMG]:** You carry out socio-historical research on Freemasonry in Côte d'Ivoire. Do your investigations reveal a unified and homogenous movement or is it on the contrary more disparate?

**Francis Akindès [FA]:** Freemasonry in Côte d'Ivoire is a constellation of obediences divided between so-called 'regular' obediences and 'liberal and non-dogmatic' obediences. These epithets are the heritage of old arguments between the Masonry descended from the English tradition and that of the French tradition from the time of the Revolution in 1789. To simplify, let us say that English Masonry was dominated by certain entities of high social rank and wanted to remain aristocratic; it did not claim to be democratic. By contrast, and bathed in the Republican spirit, French Masonry claimed to be more egalitarian and inclusive, within certain limits. This dual heritage was exported and made its way into the African space, where we now find obediences known as 'regular' that call the other obediences 'irregular', arguing that they do not recognize certain principles that would define regularity. On the other side, there are obediences that deny being 'irregular' and define themselves instead as 'liberal and non-dogmatic'. These obediences reciprocally call each other 'Frères d'en face' [brothers across the way]. There is no need to go deeper into the details of this complex history here, but it should be kept in mind so as to understand the development of African Masonry in general and Ivorian Masonry in particular.

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## **MMG: When was Freemasonry introduced in Côte d'Ivoire? What are the main events of its local history?**

**FA:** Freemasonry came to Côte d'Ivoire in the saddlebags of colonization. The Ivorian Masonic adventure began in 1930 with the creation in Abidjan of a lodge affiliated with the Grand Orient de France (GODF) called 'Fraternité africaine'. Most members of this lodge were French administrators, merchants, or soldiers. All of them were colonists or expatriates. In fact, at the time only Europeans could be initiated. Due to a rather racist mindset, it was thought that black people were not yet 'initiable'. What was happening in the Ivorian colony contrasted sharply with what could be observed in metropolitan France, where Africans like Blaise Diagne had already been initiated. Educated in France, the man who was the first African deputy elected to the French Chamber of Deputies is known for having helped Clemenceau recruit Senegalese tirailleurs during the First World War<sup>2</sup>.

The Fraternité africaine Lodge can therefore be considered the mother lodge of Freemasonry in Côte d'Ivoire. Its history is marked by two dramatic events. The first goes back to 12 January 1941. At the request of the chief prosecutor of the Vichy government, the presiding judge of the tribunal of Grand-Bassam confiscated all the assets of the Fraternité africaine Lodge. Then, on 7 March 1941, all the insignias, decorations, and other symbols of the obedience were publicly burned in Abidjan in a sort of auto-da-fé. The lodge building was also sold at auction (interestingly, it was purchased by Freemason sympathisers). This part of history is not well known. It is tied to Vichy and Nazi ideologies—the Nazis were occupying half of France at the time—and they saw Freemasonry, like communism and socialism, as a movement to fight and eradicate. In France and in the colonies, this political adversity combined with the secular hostility the Catholic Church displayed towards Freemasonry. In Côte d'Ivoire, the Roman Catholic Church's opposition to Freemasonry is nothing new.

After the war, it took time for the Fraternité africaine Lodge to recover its footing. It was then rebuilt around a Venerable Master named Villot, a Frenchman, who tried to revitalize and reorganize Masonic life in Abidjan. However, the sad events of 1941 had deeply affected the Freemasons of the time and they developed a culture of clandestineness, much like what happened in France. This trauma is essential to understanding the clandestine culture of Freemasons in the French tradition.

The period between 1948 and 1958 was punctuated by difficulties in bringing back Masonic life and dealing with the aftermath of the hostility of the

1. Interview conducted by Marie Miran-Guyon on 1 March 2018.

2. See: [https://www.xibar.net/Vie-et-mort-de-Blaise-Diagne-Franc-macon-actif\\_a23616.html](https://www.xibar.net/Vie-et-mort-de-Blaise-Diagne-Franc-macon-actif_a23616.html).

3. On the history of the 'false plots', see Baulin (1982, Chapter 5) and Diarra (1998).

4. President Houphouët-Boigny stated that he had committed suicide in prison (which, in principle, should have excluded him from having

Christian funeral rites). In defiance of this version of events, Mgr. Bernard Yago, archbishop of Abidjan, travelled to Grand-Morié to participate in his Catholic burial, which led to a crisis between the Church and the head of state (Grah Mel, 1998).

Vichy colonial government. The Masons of *Fraternité africaine* affiliated with the GODF kept a low profile and continued to develop their sense of human brotherhood by participating in several associations, including the Red Cross, the Human Rights League, the *Ligue de l'enseignement* (Education League), public childcare centres, parent-teacher associations, and the Rotary Club. During this period, it is a well-known fact that Niangoran Eyemon became the first Ivorian initiated into the *Fraternité africaine* Lodge in 1953. This began the slow process of the Africanisation of Ivorian Freemasonry.

In 1957, the *Grande Loge de France* (GLDF) opened its first lodge in Abidjan, called 'Concorde universelle'. In partnership with the GLDF, the GODF launched a project to combine the Ivorian lodges. However, the GLDF raised concerns about this ecumenical project, which was brought to a halt. The Masonic quarrels of France were exported onto African soil!

### Independence and the trauma of 'false plots'

#### **MMG: Did the independence of Côte d'Ivoire have an impact on 'colonial' Freemasonry?**

**FA:** One year after independence, in 1961, the plan to combine the lodges finally came to fruition. *Fraternité africaine*, affiliated with the GODF, and three lodges affiliated with the GLDF—*Concorde universelle* and *Fraternité Indépendance* in Abidjan, and *Unité et progrès* in Bouaké—combined to form a new national obedience called the *Grande Loge de Côte d'Ivoire* (GLCI). This new lodge negotiated treaties of recognition with French obediences. It continued to work and to recruit members.

Then came the year 1963 and the events known as the 'false plots'<sup>3</sup>. President Houphouët-Boigny publicly accused Ivorian Freemasonry, and in particular the newly created GLCI, of carrying out subversive activities against the state. Houphouët-Boigny did not understand what these people did who gathered together to reflect, who were not necessarily of the same ethnicity, who brought together white and black people: in short, people whose activities and ways of thinking escaped him. He then decided that it was a plot against him and the power he was trying to establish in an authoritarian manner. He claimed that these Freemasons represented the left wing of his party, the *Parti démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire* (Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire, PDCI), and he suspected them of having communist sympathies. The Freemasons were in the middle of work at the lodge when they were all arrested. One of them was Ernest Boka, at the time Chief Justice of the Supreme Court: He was named the mastermind of the plots (Boka later died in prison on 6 April 1964 under controversial circumstances<sup>4</sup>; he was later pardoned by President Bédié). In addition to Ernest Boka, five other people identified as Ivorian Freemasons were sentenced to death by the State Security Court in 1964 after a travesty of

justice and a summation by Philippe Grégoire Yacé, Speaker of the National Assembly at the time. They were: Jean-Baptiste Mockey, Jean Konan Banny, Kouakou Aoulou, and Charles Donwahi. Amadou Thiam, husband of the president's niece, was acquitted by the verdict<sup>5</sup>. Several other Freemasons were imprisoned, and most of the French members of the lodge were deported from the country. The GLCI was closed and Freemasonry banned. As a result of this trauma, Freemasonry returned to secrecy as it had under the Vichy regime in 1941. The most courageous of the Freemasons continued to meet, but in secret.

In 1971, President Houphouët-Boigny recognized that he had been deceived by a police commissioner and that the plots were a fabrication. In 1972, Fred Zeller, Grand Master of the GODF, came to Abidjan to meet with Houphouët-Boigny. He negotiated directly with the president to authorize the reopening of the *Fraternité africaine* Lodge. French senator Pierre Biarnès, at the time a correspondent for the *Le Monde* newspaper in Africa, also played an important role. Houphouët-Boigny accepted the reopening of the Ivorian lodges on the condition that it take place under the auspices and responsibility of the French obediences, the GODF (for *Fraternité africaine*, 1972) and the GLDF (for *Concorde universelle*, 1974). The national lodge, the GLCI, remained prohibited. From this time onward, Freemasonry became active again, developing quickly and initiating many Ivorians. Yet Ivorian Freemasonry has kept the stigma of the two moments of political violence that had branded it.

### **Emergence of a 'regular' obedience and intra-Masonic separatism**

This period of growth took place at the same time as the appearance of a new obedience in Côte d'Ivoire affiliated with the Grande Loge nationale française (GLNF), which itself is associated with the United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE). This obedience is 'regular' because it is affiliated with English Freemasonry, which is at the origin of Masonry in the eighteenth century. In 1975, this movement established a first lodge in Yamoussoukro called Nucleus, which grew quickly, with other lodges following. In 1989, the obedience was consecrated under the name Grande Loge de Côte d'Ivoire (GLCI; the same name as the defunct GLCI of 1961).

This obedience was created by merchants and businessmen, in the business environment. Some said that the obedience was created to get closer to the government. As I mentioned before, this obedience followed principles that the other lodges considered undemocratic, to the point that they called it 'exclusionary Freemasonry'. The wheeler-dealers appropriated the principles of aristocratic Freemasonry to create a sort of group 'amongst themselves'. Everything took place as if Nucleus—which became the GLCI by taking the name of the

5. These individuals were all finally set free between 1965 and 1967. See Odo (2017, pp. 91-92).

first national lodge and was at the time the youngest of the Ivorian obediences—was seeking to compensate for its lack of historical legitimacy on the local level by connecting with English Masonic heritage, the first in European Masonic history. It gave them a place on Ivorian soil and allowed them to present themselves as more legitimate than obediences with lodges that had been established much longer in the country—including *Fraternité africaine*, which became a national lodge under the auspices of the GODF, and *Concorde universelle*, under the auspices of the GLDF. To mark its presence, the GLCI called itself a ‘regular’ obedience and called the other obediences ‘irregular’—a label that the others did not recognize, as noted in the introduction. Even today, the two Masonic branches do not mix with each other.

For their part, the lodges claiming to adhere to ‘liberal and non-dogmatic’ obediences have multiplied and diversified. A group of lodges negotiated their autonomy with the authorisation of the GODF under the name of *Grande Eburnie* in 1990, while another group of lodges did the same with the authorisation of the GLDF under the name *Grande Loge unie de Côte d’Ivoire* (GLUCI) in 1993.

**MMG: What are the distinctive characteristics of these three obediences: GLCI, Grande Eburnie, and GLUCI?**

**FA:** The Freemasons of the GLCI cultivate exclusivity and recruit from the halls of power and business. One condition for being initiated into the GLCI is to believe in God: it is a deist obedience. By contrast, the Freemasons of the GODF, of which the *Grande Eburnie* is only an extension, are attached to the principle of *laïcité* (secularity). They recognise the transcendence that they call the ‘Great Architect of the Universe’ and the freedom of religion of their members, but they refer to themselves as secular. The Freemasons of the GLUCI are of a third type. It is a secular and not a deist obedience but, unlike the lodges of the GODF and the *Grande Eburnie* but like the GLCI, its members do not address societal issues in the lodge. They only address symbolic issues. The lodges of the GODF, essentially, consider that if the principle of humanism is what structures the values of Freemasonry, then Freemasons owe it to themselves to know about society, to understand social changes and take them into account in the hope of being agents of change. In the lodge, they therefore discuss symbolic questions, like all Freemasons do, but they also include the study of social issues. In 2013, for example, in one of the lodges of the GODF in Abidjan, the question of citizenship was intentionally scheduled as a study question. The results of their work would have been published in the Ivorian media but also and especially communicated to members of Parliament before they examined the Citizenship Law. The goal of the Freemasons, in the march towards peace after the post-electoral crisis of 2010–2011, was to convince the deputies to vote on the law in favour of ‘special dispositions in terms of the acquisition of nationality by declaration’. They saw these dispositions as

repairing an injustice and making it possible to rectify the citizenship of persons residing in Côte d'Ivoire before 1972 and that of their children.

Initiatives such as this make the Freemasons of other obediences say that the lodges of the Grand Orient are political. This argument, among others, explains the reasons for the distance between the lodges of regular obediences and those of liberal obediences, like the GODF, in Côte d'Ivoire.

The Ivorian obedience, the Grande Eburnie, established in 1990 after obtaining authorisation from the GODF, suffered from *ivoirité* ['Ivorianness']. Major dignitaries of this obedience defended this ideology, benefitted from it, and even introduced it in the lodge, which caused a split in the lodge and considerably weakened the obedience. In the context of this internal malaise at the Grande Eburnie, the GODF supported the reopening of three Grand Orient lodges in Abidjan alongside the Grande Eburnie. This decision added to the density of the Ivorian Masonic landscape.

### **MMG: What is the demographic scope of the Ivorian lodges?**

**FA:** The obediences have had different demographic developments. The GLCI recruits a great deal and has grown quickly: It boasted 1414 initiates in 2015<sup>6</sup>. Recruitment in the GODF lodges in Abidjan is more modest: The leaders of the lodges say they are more careful about the people they recruit. When combined, the three GODF lodges in Abidjan comprise no more than two hundred members. There are other lodges affiliated with other obediences in Côte d'Ivoire: Droit humain international, which has been a mixed obedience since 1960, and other Masonic movements claiming to follow the Rite of Memphis-Misraïm. This rite has its roots in Egyptian spiritual traditions and many Africans have been attracted by its esoteric spiritualism. The Masonic landscape in Côte d'Ivoire is constantly evolving; it is rich and dense. Yet the numbers are not as large as you might think: At the last count, the number of Freemasons in Côte d'Ivoire amounted to no more than 2,500.

### **MMG: Is it primarily an urban and elitist movement from a socioeconomic point of view?**

**FA:** Yes, Abidjan is the centre of most activity, even though the GLCI has tried to 'spread' by establishing itself in distant provinces in the inland cities. Other than Abidjan, it is also well-established in Yamoussoukro, a centre of its

6. Cited here: <http://glcifm.org/HISTOIRE-GLCI.18.html>. The GLCI underwent a split in 2012 with the creation of the Grande Loge Prince Hall de Côte d'Ivoire affiliated with the African-American obedience of the same name,

which attracted about fifty members.

7. The GLCI is organized in four large provinces: Province du centre (created in 1994), Grande Loge provinciale d'Abidjan (1995), Grande Loge provinciale du sud-est (1997),

and the Grande Loge provinciale d'Abidjan-Lagune (2009). The GLCI is behind the creation of the Grande Loge nationale malienne (<http://glcifm.org/HISTOIRE-GLCI.18.html>, updated in 2015).



expansion<sup>7</sup>. In general, Freemasonry remains very elitist because the capitulation—in other words, the membership fees in the Masonic vocabulary—is quite high compared to Ivorian purchasing power. The GLCI is the most elitist of them all. There are two things that it does not conceal. First, there is the fact that it never initiates women, unlike *Droit humain*, which is mixed, and the *GODF*, which now initiates women. Then there is the fact that a Freemason's progression in the initiatory order does not necessarily depend on the work carried out to better oneself but also on the good deeds performed to benefit the obedience. Even the most recent arrival can find himself in the vanguard if he is generous, no matter his level of instruction.

What the people know about Freemasonry in Côte d'Ivoire is what the media has said in particular about the GLCI, which has the most members, including several ministers. Its Grand Master is in fact the Minister of Defence, Hamed Bakayoko, who in April 2015 replaced Clotaire Magloire Coffie, who passed away in January 2017. In this way, Masons and politicians are connected in people's minds. Criticism of Freemasonry is also criticism of the politicians in its ranks. And it is not new, since in the time of President Gbagbo, the pro-Gbagbo resistance movements accused Freemasonry of being one of the sources of problems for the president, on the pretext that he did not join the 'neo-colonial' circles of Freemasonry or that the former colonisers used these circles to disrupt his power. Several articles in the press and texts on the internet were published at the time to attack the 'satanic' Masons, seen as responsible for the difficulties Gbagbo had in managing his power. In the anti-Masonic imagination, the satanism that disturbed Gbagbo then placed itself in the service of Alassane Ouattara, since he recruited several Freemason ministers. This all increased the confusion around Freemasonry and the connections hastily made between it, the political world, and the business world.

**MMG: Was there persecution of Freemasons under Gbagbo as there was under Houphouët?**

**FA:** No, never. Our studies showed that a good number of his collaborators were Masons.

**MMG: Did the Catholic Church under Gbagbo support the denunciation of Masonry by some Pentecostal preachers?**

**FA:** No, at least not in a pronounced or public way.

### **New tensions between the Catholic Church and Freemasonry**

**MMG: In late January 2017, the Grand Master of the GLCI, Clotaire Magloire Coffie, passed away. Mgr. Jean-Pierre Kutwa, the Archbishop of**

**Abidjan, refused to celebrate the requiem mass, and later the episcopal conference of Côte d'Ivoire made it known that the Church would now refuse to allow Freemasons to take the sacrament<sup>8</sup>. Where does this tension between the Church and Freemasonry come from and what does it mean?**

**FA:** Today, the Catholic Church in Côte d'Ivoire has been infiltrated by different types of movements, in particular the Pentecostal movement and what could be called 'spiritualities without God', like the Rosicrucian movement, the transnational Japanese organisation Sukyo Mahikari, and many other movements. The Church believes that out of all these movements, Freemasonry recruits in particular from the elite, placing it in direct competition for control of mindsets. The Church decided to make a statement with the death of Clotaire Magloire Coffie, who attended church but was known to everyone as a Freemason—he was one of the founding members of Nucleus in 1975. The Catholic faithful did not understand how the Church could always say that membership in an order like Freemasonry was a 'grave sin' while Magloire Coffie could attend church and take communion without being called out for his dual Masonic and Catholic membership. It should be noted that the brother of Magloire Coffie, Pomelie Coffie—also an influential member of the GLCI—had died two months previously and he received the honours of a requiem mass, which set people talking inside the Church.

After the passing of Magloire Coffie, Mgr. Jean-Pierre Kutwa thus decided to mark the occasion by refusing Christian funeral rites. The episcopal conference then produced a pastoral letter warning the Catholic faithful about the seriousness of the sin of belonging to what the bishops considered to be a sect. The following weekend, the Church gave instructions for homilies to be given on the subject in all the churches of Côte d'Ivoire. In response, a Freemason reacted in an article that circulated on the internet and in the press to denounce what he considered to be a 'violent campaign to denigrate Freemasonry without understandable reasons'<sup>9</sup>. In his article, this Freemason describes the homilies as combining 'lies and slander'. He asks why the Ivorian Church is producing these violent diatribes 'at a time when, in the Vatican, voices are increasingly strong in calling to move beyond the prejudice against Freemasonry'.

Unlike the Gbagbo period, where the Protestant and Evangelical attacks on Freemasonry were politicised, in the current tension between Catholics and

8. The press widely reported this information. See *La Croix*, 9 February, 22 May, and 12 June 2017. In October 2017, the Catholic Church of Benin adopted the same position, refusing funeral rites for José Loko, Grand Master of the Grande Loge maçonnique du Bénin and honorary

consul of Côte d'Ivoire in Benin, but the case received less attention in Benin than in Côte d'Ivoire.

9. Article entitled 'L'Église ivoirienne contre la franc-maçonnerie' published, for example, here: <https://www.connectionivoirienne.net/126870/>

[pour-comprendre-la-campagne-de-denigrement-de-leglise-catholique-de-cote-divoire-contre-la-franc-maconnerie.](#)

10. *La Croix*, 25 January 2016.

11. *La Croix*, 18 February 2016.

Freemasons, politics are absent, albeit not completely. There is the impression that the Church is confronting Freemasonry as a competing sphere of spirituality in the public arena since the Clotaire Magloire Coffie affair. What are the reasons for this tension? I asked several Freemasons about the pastoral letter so as to understand their perspective. Their statements corroborated and developed the arguments of the hurried article by the Freemason cited above. These interviews show that Freemasons think the Church has launched a campaign to demonise Freemasonry—the ‘Masonic plot’ and ‘black masses’: an old technique found in much writing and even in films. These Ivorian Freemasons believe that this demonisation is on the decline in Europe and are surprised that the Church in Côte d’Ivoire ‘is rediscovering and reproducing it unreflectively a century or more later’. The Freemasons argue that the position of the Roman Catholic Church towards Freemasonry has never been clear or constant in history and that it has considerably evolved since the Second World War. The excommunication of Freemasons disappeared from canonical law in 1983, the date when Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) established that initiation in a Masonic order was a grave sin, which Pope Francis has since tried to attenuate because, for him, ‘it’s better to be an atheist than a hypocritical Catholic’. In support of their argument, Ivorian Freemasons cite Jean Rigal, a Catholic theologian, who wrote the following on the Freemasons in 2016: ‘They are people who often live with explicit moral and civic values. Why not increase the opportunities for dialogue? [ ... ] In the present context, wouldn’t debate be more beneficial than condemnation? How is this call not included in the exhortation launched by the Jubilee Year on the theme of mercy?’<sup>10</sup> They also quote Cardinal Ravasi who wrote, also in 2016, that while differences ‘clearly persist, we must go beyond hostility, outrage, and reciprocal prejudice, we must reexplain the principle of respect for difference, the foundation of tolerance if we wish to make Humanity’<sup>11</sup>.

Ivorian Freemasons also denounce the use of the term ‘secret society’ by the Church and present Freemasonry more as a discreet group, in the sense that it is a circle in which people can work on their own personal betterment: ‘When working to improve oneself, there is no need to make noise and seek attention’, they explain. They also assert that contrary to the widely-held belief that people enter the lodge to find their place in the sun, Freemasonry is not a job centre.

In its pastoral letter, the Ivorian Church speaks of the need to protect doctrine and morals in accordance with the faith. For this reason, it believes that Freemasonry and the Christian faith are incompatible, with an implicit message for those in particular who wish to become or are already priests. The Freemasons defend themselves by explaining that Christian faith does not prevent openness to those things that can strengthen it. They compare Freemasonry to dietary supplements: ‘When you are ill, you care for yourself by taking the medicine prescribed, but you can also care for yourself better by taking dietary supplements that are not prescribed by your doctor but which improve your health’, replied the Venerable Master of a lodge who described

himself as a devout Catholic. Freemasonry has never prevented anyone from having faith, according to the Freemasons, no matter their obedience. The Freemasons who are religious, including some priests encountered discreetly in my research, respond that their faith has been strengthened by the teachings of Freemasonry, which they say are by no means in contradiction with Christian doctrine<sup>12</sup>. The only difference, they note, is that when some speak of Christ or Allah, Freemasonry, in order to bring people together, does not speak of Christ to avoid alienating Muslims nor Allah to avoid alienating Christians, but it speaks of the Great Architect of the Universe: Each person puts it into the terms that they think are the most appropriate. The divinity of Christ, of course, is and remains Christian. The Freemasons, however, argue that to bring people together, to be the centre of unity, you have to respect the deep beliefs of each person and not impose a dominant religion on others. The pastoral letter states that Freemasons practice a disturbing relativism. Freemasons reply that what the Catholics call relativism is more a respect for difference in a pluralist society. They do not have a truth to communicate to people like the Church communicates its truth. They do, however, have a space where they call on individuals to progress on the path of their own truth. This is one of the main points of friction between the Church and Freemasonry. Several Ivorian Freemasons encountered during the surveys quoted these words by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the famous Freemason: 'He who is different from me does not impoverish me—he enriches me'. Especially since Freemasonry, according to them, aims to unite that which is separate and prevent people from remaining in parish rivalries that, in the end, do not enrich humanity. Having delved into this Masonic literature to gain a better understanding of its foundations and having engaged in this survey of Freemasons, I have personally come to the following conclusion: Whether it is a deist or non-dogmatic and/or secular Freemasonry, it takes place in a situation of quasi-Christian, more or less Christlike spirituality.

**MMG: Of all the Masonic obediences present in Côte d'Ivoire, which one was the most affected or reacted the most to the position taken by the Catholic Church?**

**FA:** Only the GODF lodges said that they organised reflection on it. They even invited Father Norbert Abékan to an exchange, but he turned down the

**12.** The Ivorian lodges of the GLCI have chosen to be called 'Saint Jean L'Évangéliste' (Abidjan), 'Les Bienheureux Saint Jean' (Abidjan-Lagune), and 'Saint Jean le Baptiste' (Adzopé). Information from: [www.glcifm.org](http://www.glcifm.org).

**13.** In Senegal, in January 2018, the Rencontres humanistes et fraternelles d'Afrique et de Madagascar (African and Malagasy Humanist and Brotherly Meetings, REHFRAM)—a platform for dialogue between African and Malagasy

freemasons since 1992—had to be cancelled under pressure from Islamic religious organisations (*Jeune Afrique*, 17 January 2018). In 1992, the first meeting of the REHFRAM was held in Dakar without incident.

invitation. The Freemasons say they are disappointed that a leading public figure would refuse to engage in debate and shared reflection on objects of difference.

**MMG:** It seems paradoxical that the Grand Orient, which is secular, is more engaged in debate than the deist lodges. What was the reaction of the GLCI, whose Grand Master was denied Catholic funeral rites?

**FA:** The Freemasons of the GLCI chose the position of silence because they do not have a culture of debating social issues, I believe. It is a strange reaction to say the least, because you would expect them to react by being more open with the public about who they are and what they do as has happened in England and the United States in the obediences of which they are an offshoot. Public appearances can help Freemasonry benefit from a better public understanding and reduce prejudice. Instead, they preferred to remain silent. This leaves a greater sense of opaqueness about Masonic groups.

**MMG:** Does it mean that the members of this lodge hope to keep their identity as Masons a secret to retain the benefit of the Catholic sacrament?

**FA:** This was the impression I got when speaking with them. It is a vital aspect for those of them who are Catholic. They are afraid of being revealed and no longer receiving the sacrament. They cannot conceive of their funeral rites outside the Church and the Church is playing on this chord, knowing that they are deeply attached to it. These people are hiding their Masonic identity and the Church, until now, has obviously been pretending not to recognize their dual membership. However, the Church may be preparing to take a more radical position against Catholic Freemasons, to wage war on this dual membership.

**MMG:** What is the situation among the authorities of Islam?

**FA:** They have not taken a public position on Freemasonry, but they must know that Hamed Bakayoko, who claims to be Muslim, is also a freemason. It could be a temporary arrangement and the situation may change. At present, imams are turning a blind eye to this dual membership on the grounds that it can be useful to them. However, if the leadership of the obedience changes, the Muslim position could change as well<sup>13</sup>. It is also not impossible that the criticism by the Catholic Church also comes from an underlying fear that Freemasonry is a synonym for the development of anti-Christian tendencies, and even, in a phantasmagorical way, especially since Hamed Bakayoko has occupied the position of Grand Master, of Muslim movements. It is far from a war of religions. But in the back of their minds, there are whispered fears that the other religion is controlling a secret machine that is beyond their reach and could sneak up on them one day.

## Freemasonry and politics: Myths and realities

**MMG:** To finish, does Freemasonry have an influence on political life in Côte d'Ivoire?

**FA:** The presence of Freemasonry in circles of power has become more visible since the newsletter *La Lettre du Continent* started to unveil the names of Freemason figures who occupy political posts in Côte d'Ivoire and elsewhere. The general public then begins to think that the number of Freemason ministers is growing, leading to the idea that Freemasonry is influential in politics. In reality, these figures occupy their posts for a variety of reasons and not because they are Freemasons. The choice to become a Freemason is their individual choice, not part of their political career. We cannot say that Masonic orders influence Ivorian political life. I see no signs of a Masonic plot in politics.

Ultimately, Freemasonry in Côte d'Ivoire is far from homogenous. Rather than Freemasonry in Côte d'Ivoire, I would say that there are Freemasonries. In general, the power of Freemasonry, in Côte d'Ivoire and elsewhere, remains an issue that keeps rearing its head. Any magazine or newspaper with a headline on Freemasonry will sell. From a research perspective, it seems important to continue studying all aspects of the interplay between Freemasonry, religion, and politics, just as historians, sociologists, and anthropologists study the interaction between religions of the Book and politics. It is an almost apocryphal dimension of the ongoing history of African societies and of Ivorian society in particular.

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