The fascinating story of the Ivory Coast’s mega-basilica

Why is the world’s largest church building in Yamoussoukro?

by Philip Jenkins in the November 18, 2020 issue

The Basilica of Our Lady of Peace in Côte d’Ivoire (Photo © Hanay via Creative Commons license)

There is notable architecture, there is odd architecture, and there is a church in the African city of Yamoussoukro that falls equally into both categories. This is the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace, a colossal structure which is the world’s largest single church building of any denomination, substantially bigger than its nearest competitor, St. Peter’s in Rome. The Basilica of Our Lady of Peace is a strikingly traditional design with a dome that recalls St. Peter’s (although taller), and the whole richly ornamented edifice looks like a monument to Europe’s Tridentine faith, although it was dedicated only in 1990. The obvious question arises: What on earth is it doing there, just a little north of the equator, in the nation of Côte d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast)?

The story involves multiple mysteries. Yamoussoukro is a substantial city, but it is dwarfed by the vital and fast-growing metropolis of Abidjan, less than 150 miles away. So why is the mega-basilica located in the smaller city?

Nor is Côte d'Ivoire a notably zealous country, and still less is it a bastion of Catholic devotion. Of some 27 million Ivorians today, 43 percent are Muslim, 17 percent Catholic, and 17 percent other Christians. Animists comprise a solid share of the remainder but so do people who frankly declare that they have no religion in particular, which is quite a rare state of affairs in Africa. When the basilica was designed and built in the 1980s, Côte d'Ivoire had well under 2 million Catholics. In terms of its religious culture, the country at that time was regarded as a delightful refuge from the tribal and interfaith struggles that beset other nations in the region.

The key to understanding Yamoussoukro lies in one man: Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who can legitimately claim to be the father of his country. Born in Yamoussoukro in 1905, he was a tribal chief who became the leading figure in what was then a tiny agricultural settlement. By 1950 it still had just 500 residents. Matters changed very rapidly when European empires in Africa disintegrated in the late 1950s, leaving varying degrees of chaos and dictatorship.

But Côte d'Ivoire, which won independence from France in 1960, proved an enviable exception. As the nation's first president, Houphouët-Boigny remained closely aligned with the old colonial motherland, and he staunchly opposed both communism and nationalist extremism. His statesmanship gave him a continental influence far beyond what might be expected from his Ivorian power base: in 1960, the country had just 3.5 million people. That elder statesman role grew as he outlived most of the first generation of independence leaders, and he held power until his death in 1993.

Economically, Houphouët-Boigny enjoyed real successes, to the point that commentators wrote of the Ivorian Miracle. Although an authoritarian ruler, he eschewed repression: the country's jails held no political prisoners, and the media were strikingly free. In a society potentially divided between native Ivorians and immigrants, he was generous in extending power and office to ethnic outsiders. Ivorians of all political shades had real affection for Papa Houphouët—or Le Vieux, the Old Guy.

Prosperity and relative freedom ensured that Ivorians were tolerant of Houphouët-Boigny’s personal obsessions, which took the form of glorifying his home village. In 1983, he made Yamoussoukro the country’s political and administrative capital, displacing Abidjan, which was redefined as the economic center. Yamoussoukro became the center of a wildly ambitious building boom. The blueprint for a great city demanded a spiritual presence, and for Papa Houphouët, that meant the kind of pre-Vatican II Catholicism that he had grown up with. The result was the basilica, which in 1990 was consecrated by that other traditional-minded soul, Pope John Paul II.

Subsequent events have undermined the legacy of Le Vieux. Already in his closing years, the Ivorian economy was imploding, and coups and mutinies were a growing threat. His successors were far less skilled than he had been in balancing religious and ethnic forces, so that northern Muslims became increasingly resentful of southern Christian domination. For Côte d’Ivoire, that onetime haven of tolerance and harmony, the present century has witnessed a series of coups and wrenching civil wars.

The Basilica of Our Lady of Peace, meanwhile, is a ghostly presence, standing amid the uncompleted building sites of all those proposed government offices and palaces. Although the church can accommodate 18,000 worshipers, typical Sunday congregations usually run at three or four hundred. Its future remains uncertain. While some hope it may become a center of African pilgrimage, it is simply too far removed from the vibrant centers of Catholic population, for instance, in eastern Nigeria. At present, the basilica stands as a monument to a grand, if flawed, ambition.

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