

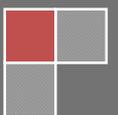
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# AFRICA'S FREEMASONS

A strange inheritance

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A European import, freemasonry is remarkably widespread in both French and English-speaking Africa, as it is in Latin America and the United States. Freemasonry is often to be found close to the centres of power. Simon Bolivar and President Roosevelt were both masons; and in Gabon, President Omar Bongo is their eminence grise. African freemasons often seek to act as mediators in the frequent crises accompanying the current democratisation of the continent.

In Congo-Brazzaville, the former president, Denis Sassou Nguesso, and his successor, Pascal Lissouba, are both freemasons, although they belong to different chapters of the order. Mr Lissouba is an initiate of the Grand Orient of France while Mr Sassou Nguesso belongs to a Senegalese lodge affiliated to the French Grand National Lodge. After the recent clashes of armed militia in the capital, French and African freemasons of the Grand Lodge of France, the United Grand Lodge of Côte d'Ivoire and the Grand Orients and United Lodges of Cameroon joined forces in an attempt to restore peace, though their efforts have not so far met with success (1). This is, nevertheless, a revealing instance of the freemasons' influence in French-speaking Africa.

The Grand Orient established its first lodge at Saint-Louis in Senegal in 1781 and, as a consequence, the names of a number of distinguished freemasons are to be found in the history of French colonial rule. First came two proponents of the abolition of slavery: the Abbé Grégoire at the time of the French Revolution, followed by Victor Schoelcher, a junior minister for the navy under the Second Republic, who was instrumental in obtaining the final abolition of slavery in 1848 after its restoration by Napoleon I (2). Then, Algeria's Emir Abdel Kader was admitted to the Grand Orient in 1864 as a mark of gratitude for his protection of the Damascus Christians during the 1860 massacres, when he was in exile in Syria.

The great French empire builder, Jules Ferry, was a also freemason and so was the colonial governor, Félix Eboué, a Black from French Guiana, who rallied Chad to the Free French cause in 1940, leading the whole of French Equatorial Africa and Cameroon to support General de Gaulle at a time when the Vichy Government was introducing laws against masons and Jews.

There were a good many freemasons (or members of the "brotherhood of light" as it is sometimes known) in the French colonial administration. After the second world war, most of them campaigned for independence for the French overseas territories in Africa and more and more Africans joined the lodges. After 1960, the great year for independence, freemasonry continued to spread, acquiring an African identity and loosing its ties with the French chapters. National chapters were established in a number of French-speaking African countries but they retained fairly close links with the French chapters, sometimes even reflecting the divisions between them.

Freemasonry is known for being multifarious, divided even, and perhaps more so in France than elsewhere (3). The clearest division is between the Grand Orient and the other lodges. Unlike the other rites, the Grand Orient does not invoke the "Great Architect of the Universe", that is to say God, in its constitution and its members do not swear on the Bible. The Grand Lodge of France and the French Grand National Lodge both recognise the "Great Architect", but the latter is the only one to be recognised by the United Lodge of England, the parent chapter of the order worldwide.

French freemasons continue to take an interest in Africa. Under the Fifth Republic, at least two freemasons were in charge of the ministry for cooperation, the Socialist Christian Nucci of the Grand Orient and the Gaullist Jacques Godfrain of the Grand Lodge of France (4). Guy Penne, adviser on African affairs to François Mitterrand during his term as president between 1981-86, is a member of the Grand Orient. And Ambassador Fernand Wibaux, President Chirac's personal adviser on African affairs (along with the late Jacques Foccart), is an initiate of that chapter.

Generally speaking, the national chapters in French-speaking African countries are the fruit of a merger between the lodges of the Grand Orient and the Grand Lodge of France, established before independence. This is true of the Grand Equatorial Rite of Gabon, the Grand Orient and United Lodges of Cameroon, and the Grand Orient and Associated Lodges of Congo and Benin. In Gabon, however, in addition to the Grand Equatorial Rite of Gabon, there is also a Grand National Lodge affiliated to the French Grand National Lodge. In Côte d'Ivoire, there are a number of different chapters, including the Grand United Lodge and the Grand Eburnie, which are close to the Grand Lodge of France and the Grand Orient respectively. In Togo, there are lodges affiliated to the Grand Orient and the Grand Lodge of France.

In Senegal, the lodges of the Grand Orient and the Grand Lodge of France have also kept their affiliations, but the French Grand National Lodge is also represented. The freemasons of Togo and Senegal have not established a national chapter, apparently because they are afraid it might be infiltrated by the regime and used for its own ends, as has sometimes happened in other countries.

However that may be, most of the chapters that are linked to a greater or lesser degree with the Grand Orient and the Grand Lodge of France participate in the REHFRAMs (African and Madagascan humanist and fraternal meetings) which have been held in an African capital every year since 1992 and to which those French lodges are invited. There were 400 delegates at the meeting at Libreville in Gabon in 1996 and 600 at Cotonou in Benin in 1997, including representatives from several countries in Europe.

The African lodges affiliated to the French Grand National Lodge, which is on its own in this respect, do not take part in these meetings. The Lodge has increased its membership in Black Africa in recent years and its progress, as the only French chapter recognised by the Grand United Lodge of England and by freemasonry in America, is a source of annoyance to the other French lodges where it is regarded by some members as a covert means of extending Anglo-American influence in Africa - an imputation that is hotly denied.

None of the lodges in former British colonies are invited to the REHFRAMs (they too are divided into chapters linked with the Grand United Lodges of England, Scotland and Ireland respectively) . This is the case, for example, in Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Uganda. On the other hand, the Grand Orient of Zaire, an emanation of the Grand Orient of Belgium, does take part in these humanist and fraternal meetings between lodges in French-speaking Africa.

### **Persecution**

Freemasons have always attracted enemies, often of a somewhat nefarious kind, and this is perhaps their best claim to the high moral ground. The most violent and inveterate of these was Hitler, locked in combat against an imaginary Judeo-masonic plot. Freemasonry was also outlawed under the fascist dictatorships of Mussolini, Franco, Salazar and Pinochet.

At the other extreme, the communists, too, were hostile, at least in the early years. In 1922, the French Communist Party ratified the decision of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International to exclude freemasons, and French communists were effectively obliged to choose between freemasonry and membership of the party (5). More recently, Islamists, too, have formally declared their opposition to the order.

The Vatican's position has changed substantially over the years. The Catholic Church first condemned freemasonry in 1738. This was essentially the work of Pope Clement XII, whose hostility to the "brotherhood of light" came to a head at the time of the movement to separate Church and State. Despite a certain stand-off in the battle between clergy and laity - freemasons are no longer excommunicated - , the lodges are

still suspect in the eyes of hardline Catholics. In 1983, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith again proclaimed that practising freemasons were "in a state of grievous sin". It was against this background that freemasonry was banned and masons persecuted in many African countries.

The worst persecution of African freemasons occurred in 1963 in Côte d'Ivoire, when President Félix Houphouët-Boigny imagined himself to be the target of a series of plots. This was reason enough for getting rid of the leaders of the left wing of the Democratic Party - the only party in Côte d'Ivoire at the time - who were suspected of communist sympathies. Many of those accused were freemasons, most of them members of the Grand Orient, notably Jean-Baptiste Mockey, Jean Konan Banny, Amadou Thiam and Ernest Boka. They were humiliated, beaten and tortured, sometimes in the presence of the president himself, at Yamoussoukro. Ernest Boka died in detention. Freemasonry, including the Grand Lodge of France, was outlawed.

However, in 1971 the president himself issued a solemn public statement, acknowledging that the 1963 plots had been a pure fabrication and laying the blame on an obscure police inspector. The accused were rehabilitated and some of them, for example Jean-Baptiste Mockey, were even reinstated as ministers. The Ivorian lodges were revived in the early 1970s after Pierre Biarnès, an initiate of the Grand Orient and West African correspondent for *Le Monde* at the time, approached Mr Houphouët at the request of Fred Zeller, then Grand Master of that chapter of the order (6).

In the former Zaire, President Mobutu outlawed freemasonry when he took power in 1965, but reinstated it in 1972. In Madagascar, President Didier Ratsiraka prohibited the movement during his first term of office, at a time when he had Marxist leanings (though he was married to a Catholic). But it has become very active again in the island since the shift to democracy in the run-up to the election of President Albert Zafy in 1993. A Madagascan Grand National Lodge was established in 1996 under the auspices of the French Grand National Lodge and in competition with the Grand Rite of Madagascar, which had close links with the Grand Orient.

With the advent of Marxist or proto-Marxist governments under Sékou Touré in Guinea, Modibo Keita in Mali and Mathieu Kérékou in Benin, freemasonry was outlawed in those countries. Fily Dabo Cissoko and Hammadoun Dicko in Mali and Barry Diawandou and Barry III in Guinea, freemasons who opposed the regimes in those countries, were arrested and died in detention. In Benin, Guy Penne had to intercede in the early 1980s, to persuade Mr Kérékou to allow the lodges to reopen.

It was in Liberia, however, that freemasons suffered the most savage attacks, when Staff Sergeant Samuel Doe seized power in a coup d'état in 1980. For generations, the

presidency of the republic and the government had been the preserve of Afro-Americans, generally affiliated to the Grand Order of Black American freemasons, known as the Prince Hall chapter, and masonic arms were displayed in the presidential palace. President Tolbert, a freemason like his predecessor William Tubman, was assassinated and all the members of his government were publicly executed on the orders of Samuel Doe.

Islam, too, has freemasonry in its sights, though this does not prevent Black African Muslims from joining the movement. Christian and Muslim Lebanese established in Africa account for a relatively high proportion of the membership of West African lodges. The reference to the "Great Architect of the Universe" is highly ecumenical and Muslim freemasons can therefore, in principle, swear on the Koran, as Jews can on the Torah and Christians on the Bible.

One of the most eminent Muslim freemasons is undoubtedly the President of Gabon, El Hadj Omar Bongo, whose conversion to Islam in 1973 came as a great surprise, the more so as most of the people of Gabon hold either animist or Christian beliefs (7).

In Senegal, freemasons are to be found in the seats of power despite the fact that the vast majority of the people adhere to the Muslim faith. An Islamist fringe element in the country is violently opposed to freemasonry. The review *Etudes islamiques* ran the headline: "No, Muslims cannot be freemasons" and the periodical *Wal Fadjiri* reprinted an article from the Egyptian review *Al Lewa al Islami* affirming that "freemasonry and the Bahāi movement, together with the Rotary, Lions and other clubs that serve them, spring from Judaism and are clearly incompatible with Islam". This hostility does not prevent various chapters from seeking to extend their membership in Muslim countries. Thus the French Grand National Lodge has recently established three lodges in Djibouti, where members swear on the Koran.

Why has freemasonry flourished in Black Africa? It can of course be argued that Africans have a long acquaintance with secret societies. There are such societies in most village communities, where, according to ethnologists such as Father Eric de Rosny, they provide an effective counterbalance to the power of the traditional chiefs (8).

It is also likely that in colonial times, those Africans generally members of the intelligentsia - who took up freemasonry saw it as a means of social advancement, since admission to a lodge placed them on an equal footing with white members of the chapter.

The esoteric and quasi-mystical aspect of the movement also attracted intellectuals such as the great Mali writer Hampaté Ba, a Muslim, who thought it would foster ecumenism

and reconciliation between the monotheist religions (9), although he did not remain a freemason for long.

The chapters of the order naturally cultivate the life of the spirit, but they are also making their mark in the world of action in the present century. The lodges in Africa, as in other continents, mean to participate in national affairs and enter the political arena on occasion, frequently in the role of mediators. A notable instance of this occurred in Benin, at the national conference accompanying the restoration of the multi-party system in 1989, when the Grand Benin Lodge issued a call for tolerance and helped to prevent violent confrontations. The freemasons of Togo, too, attempted to effect a reconciliation between President Eyadema's Rassemblement populaire du Togo and his opponents, at a meeting organised in Paris in 1993 at the headquarters of the Grand Orient. The president had closed the lodges in 1972, only to allow them to reopen a few years later. No real progress was made at the Paris talks and, as we know, this was also the case recently in Congo-Brazzaville.

### **Struggle with the Rosicrucians**

These excursions into politics naturally cause serious divisions, not only between rival chapters but also between the masons and other organisations more or less closely associated with them, at least in the minds of the public. This was the case in Cameroon, where the masons and the Rosicrucians apparently became embroiled in a struggle for power.

President Paul Biya was long assumed to be a Rosicrucian, a rumour that was lent some credence by the appointment of Titus Edzoa, former minister and Grand Master of the Rosicrucians in Cameroon, as Secretary-General to the Presidency. So it came as a terrific shock in 1996, when Serge Toussaint, the Grand Master of the French branch of the Ancient and Mystical Order of Rosicrucians, announced in the course of a working visit to Douala that the President's name was not on the roll of the Order. Titus Edzoa left his post in the Presidency a few months later and in 1997 he was arrested in connection with the liquidation of a bank. Meanwhile, the Grand Master of the Rosicrucians had announced his intention of running against Paul Biya in the next presidential elections (10).

The recent REHFRAMs have received wide coverage in the local press and press conferences have been given by African and French Grand Masters, including a joint press conference at Cotonou in 1997, reported in a Benin daily. One of the masonic dignitaries plays down what he describes as the "misunderstandings" between the Catholic church and freemasonry, adding, however, that "with other religions, Protestant and Muslim for example, there is no problem" (11).

However the 1997 REHFRAM was the occasion of a serious confrontation between the Grand Orient of France and the African chapters. The delegation of the Grand Orient took the opportunity to preach French-style secular agnosticism and this brought a strong rejoinder from the Conference of African masonic powers, to which most French-speaking lodges belong. The Conference issued a statement, complaining that Africa had suffered too much interference of every kind and asserting that the REHFRAMs cannot be allowed to become a focus for rivalries, a platform for battles of words, or the object of open or unavowed ambitions to achieve supremacy.

The last warning was essentially directed against the attempt by the Grand Orient to persuade the African chapters to abandon the liaison and information centre of the masonic powers signatories to the Strasbourg appeal, and join the intercontinental liberal masonic association established on the Grand Orient's own initiative. The Grand Orient had itself severed its links with the centre during a meeting at Santiago de Chile in 1996, accusing it of behaving like a "super-power" . The centre, established in 1961 and currently run by the former Grand Mistress of the Grand Women's Lodge of France, Marie-France Coquard, leaves chapters free to decide whether or not belief in God is to be a condition of membership, but it is critical of freemasonry in England and America (12) and aims to act more or less as a counterbalance to that tendency. It comprises almost 50 chapters in Europe, Africa and South America.

The association, which originally included some ten chapters, is even more secular than the centre and the Grand Orient's action at Cotonou should probably be seen in the wider context of French and American rivalry in Africa. However, quite apart from the negative reaction of the African chapters, the Grand Orient's action caused a number of lodges to leave the association and other French lodges made it clear that they shared the view taken by the Conference.

Sociologists will doubtless see the reaction of the Conference and its implicit rejection of the proposals of the secular members of the Grand Orient as evidence that African society is still deeply imbued with religious feeling, be it in the form of traditional, Christian, or Muslim beliefs. But that may be too simple a view. Secularism, as the Grand Orient understands it, does not exclude freedom of conscience, witness the fact that Catholic, Protestant and Muslim freemasons are admitted to that chapter of the order, an illustration of the somewhat strange attraction exerted by freemasonry in Africa.

(\*) Le Monde Diplomatique 1997