

Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix, the world's largest Catholic church

I'll try to tone down my cynical attitude, but it's going to be difficult, given the sheer number of parallels and allusions that spring to mind – I apologise in advance to my religious readers. No, my issue isn't with religion itself, but with the church – or churches – built upon it, which tend to go too far.

As in this case, for instance: the world's largest Christian church is not in the Vatican, nor even in Israel, where the religion originated, but – ta-ta-ta-tam – in Africa.



Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix, the world's largest Catholic church

It is situated in Ivory Coast, a country which, by local standards, is considered more affluent than impoverished. The country began its existence as a French colony, and then under **Félix Houphouët-Boigny**—the son of a local chieftain, who had even risen to the rank of minister in France—proclaimed the independent **Ivory Coast** in 1960. The dictator ruled the country with an iron fist, maintained close ties with France, and effectively eliminated his local rivals.

Dictators worldwide are characterised by a penchant for extravagance and a tendency to squander fortunes on completely unnecessary things, and this reflects the dictator's particular obsession – be it football or the Christian faith. Meanwhile, of course, the majority of their country's population may not exactly be keen on these kinds of expenditure. But then, they are dictators precisely because they couldn't care less they couldn't care less it doesn't really interest them.

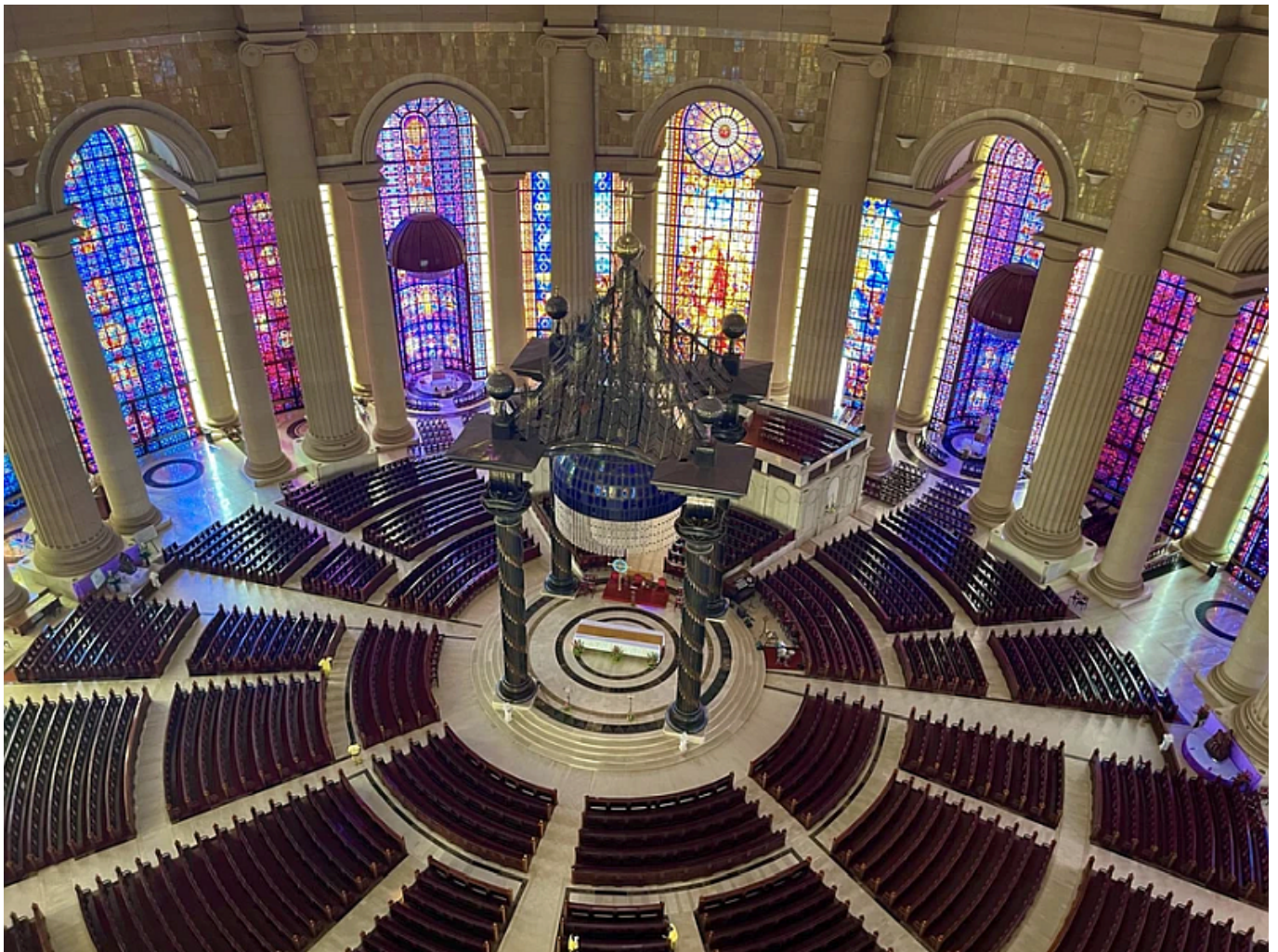
The poorer the country in question, the more these dictators – who, in almost every such case, suffer from an inferiority complex – drive it into grandiose whims. I've already given examples of this grandstanding and its consequences on this blog: [Stalin's forgotten railway](#), [The man who ordered the stolen carriages: the President of Tajikistan](#), [The great Turkmenbashi, who passed away seven years](#)

ago, [The Honecker bunker](#).

Well, Boigny really went all out too, turning his home village – a few mud huts in the middle of nowhere, home to five hundred souls **Yamoussoukro**— a village of a few mud huts in the middle of nowhere—as the capital and moved the government there. The bureaucrats must have been delighted when, leaving the coastal city of Abidjan – with its population of a million – behind, they had to relocate to the new capital, 250 km away, where initially there really was nothing at all.

But then the new capital of this crisis-torn country also began to develop – though instead of the expected infrastructure improvements, it gained, for example, the world's largest Christian church. Because it is quite certain that this was not necessarily what was most needed there, especially in a predominantly Muslim country. ~~He could have had a stadium or even a tree-lined promenade built there instead.~~

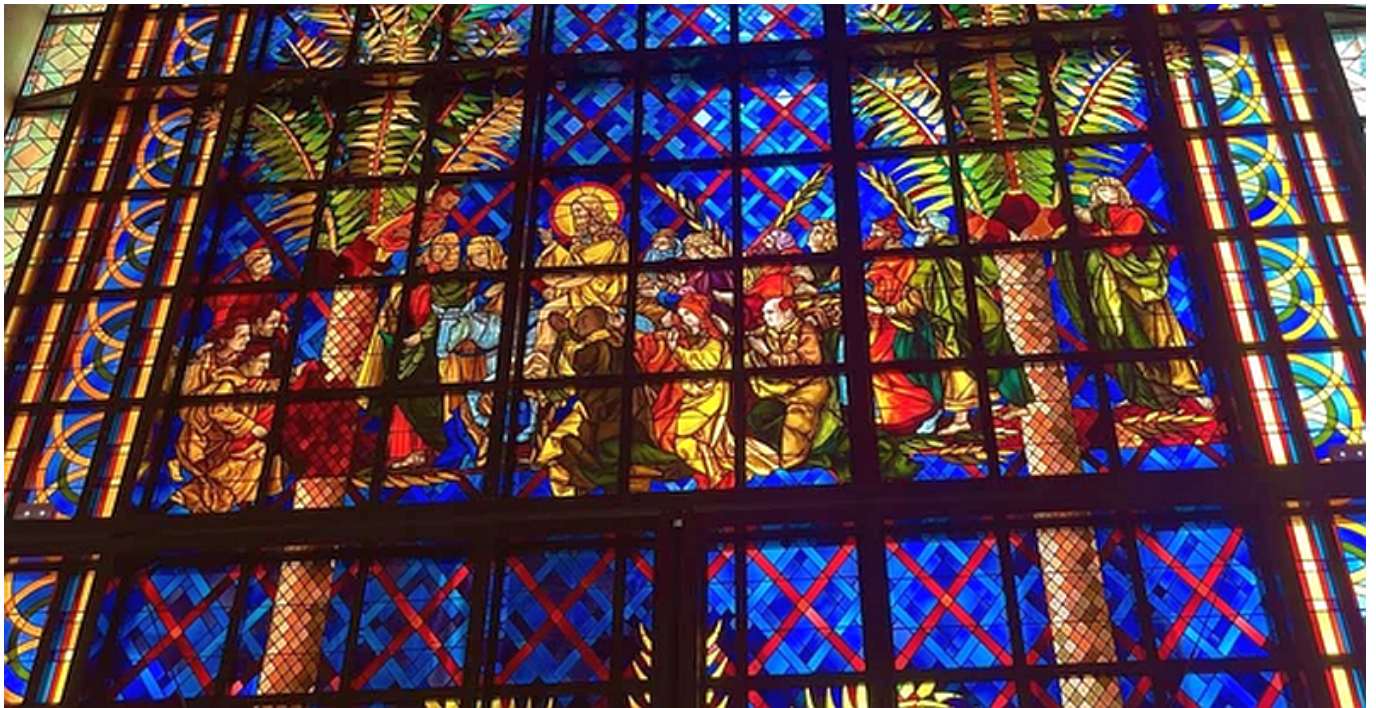
But no, the deeply devout Boigny decided that only a church larger than St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican could bring him salvation. The basilica was originally designed to be one size larger, and the building's height of 60 metres also represents a slight compromise compared to the original plans.



Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix, interior

The foundation stone was laid by Pope John Paul II on 10 August 1985, suggesting that the Church was not at all bothered by a project that was devouring almost all the resources of this impoverished country. This mad project was completed in September 1989, and His Holiness the Pope consecrated it on 10 September 1990. Incidentally, the church bears a striking resemblance to its Vatican model, with 24 pillars supporting the massive dome above the single-nave structure. Some of the columns even contain lifts, which, of course, have not been in operation since the building was handed over.

The vast interior is framed by mosaic windows, which depict scenes from the Bible with minor local adaptations; whilst the display of sponsors on commercial television has always been a subject of debate, here such questions probably never even arose. Boigny himself is kneeling before the figure of Jesus (it is to his credit that it is not the other way round), flanked on either side by the other sponsors. Fortunately, Coca-Cola, FIFA and Apple were not represented in this instance, which speaks volumes for their considerable restraint. Yes, there is a term for this: *'bad taste'*, but in the world of dictators, this word almost always loses its meaning.



Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix, stained-glass windows

The vast building can accommodate 18,000 people with 7,011 seats; each of the various sections has its own independently operated air-conditioning system. The pews also have their own ventilation system. These benches and the furnishings are made from local Ivory Coast timber, though there is a twist to the story: the wood was first shipped to Italy for processing before being fitted into the building. The building's marble cladding also comes from Italy.

Stepping out of the church and crossing the forecourt, which can accommodate 150,000 people, one reaches a vast but now neglected park, in the middle of nowhere. Indeed, there is nothing – absolutely nothing – in the vicinity of the building. On the other side of the building stand two multi-storey villas; one was built by the dictator for himself, the other for the Pope and his delegation. Both villas have stood empty ever since the church was handed over, that is, for 35 years.

There have been a few changes in the country since the handover. Boigny died in 1993, three years after the handover; I believe he is still being held to account for his actions in the afterlife. Even during his final days, unrest had begun in the country; since then, in keeping with local custom, short-lived dictators have been replaced by self-appointed coup-plotting generals. The population of the new capital has risen to 400,000, but this pales in comparison to the fact that the country's population has, in the meantime (between 1960 and 2023), increased tenfold to 31 million.



Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix, the church's vestibule

By way of introduction, before we start looking for parallels between, say, Felcsút and Yamoussoukro, the new capital, let's take a look at the other two of the three sights in the wannabe capital:

Le lac aux crocodiles: Boigny, of course, built his own palace in his home-village hometown, and surrounded it with a huge artificial lake. The palace remains inaccessible to this day, as the dictator played it safe; he stocked the lake with crocodiles. At the nearby market, you can buy dead chickens at a discount so you can take selfies with the reptiles.

Incidentally, I can't help but think of the ***The Bluff***, when Bunkó explains to his knowledgeable audience that the simplest way to dispose of corpses is to feed them to the pigs. (This post, and the monologue, [can be found here](#)). Well, perhaps they've found a more suitable animal species for this purpose in Africa. Which, incidentally, is also an excellent guard dog. Bunkó could learn a thing or two here.



Le lac aux crocodiles

Hôtel Président: Yes, it can certainly be said that, in the dictators' handbook, alongside deceit, ambition and malice, a lack of taste is also an entry requirement. Or, if they cannot manage to be tasteless themselves, they must delegate this task. For example, by surrounding themselves with people – such as architects – who (also) fulfil this requirement. A prime example of this is the Hôtel Président in Yamoussoukro, with a separate restaurant on the top floor. I'm at a loss for words to analyse it (which is rather unusual for me), so let a picture of this so-called building speak for itself:



Hôtel Président

Off-topic: Oh yes, and since I've mentioned Felcsút, let's not forget about the restraint here at home, as it isn't the capital yet. Not yet.

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Sources

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