

DE GRUYTER

Frédéric Madore

RELIGIOUS ACTIVISM ON CAMPUSES IN TOGO AND BENIN

CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM STUDENTS NAVIGATING
AUTHORITARIANISM AND LAÏCITÉ, 1970–2023



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Frédéric Madore

Religious Activism on Campuses in Togo and Benin

ZMO-Studien



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Ulrike Freitag

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Frédéric Madore

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Timeline and Map

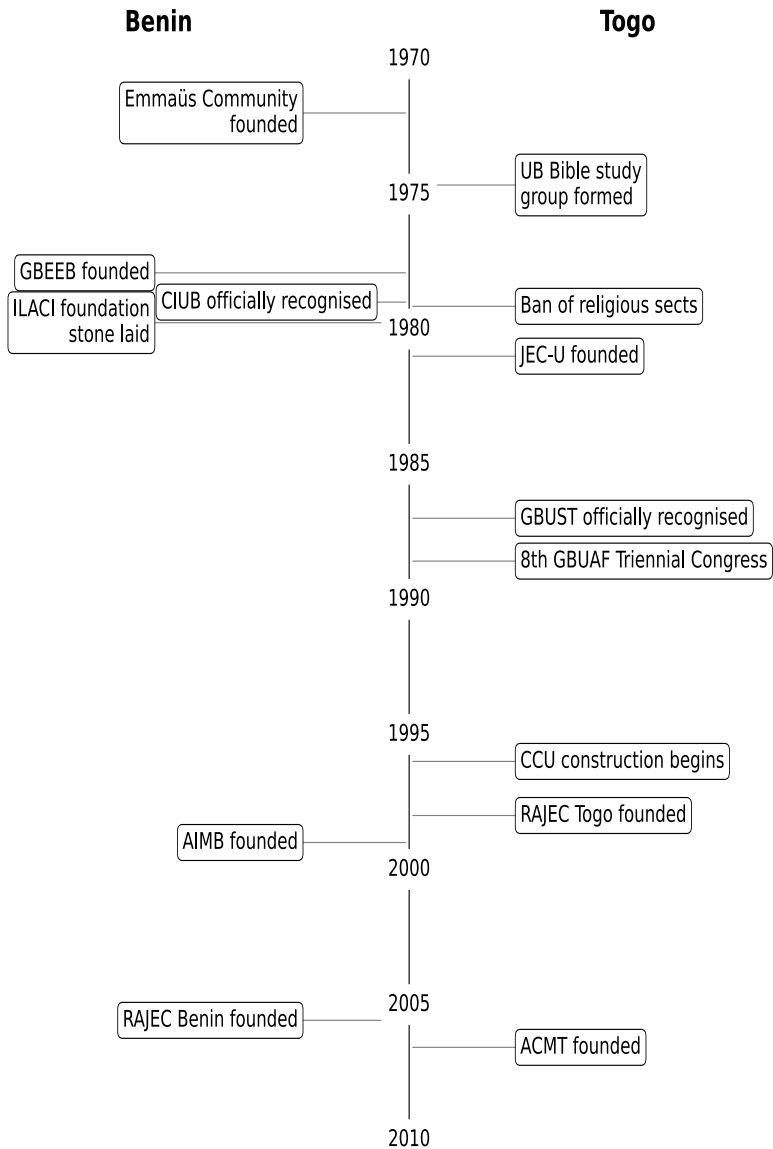


Fig. 1: Timeline of selected events related to faith-based activism.

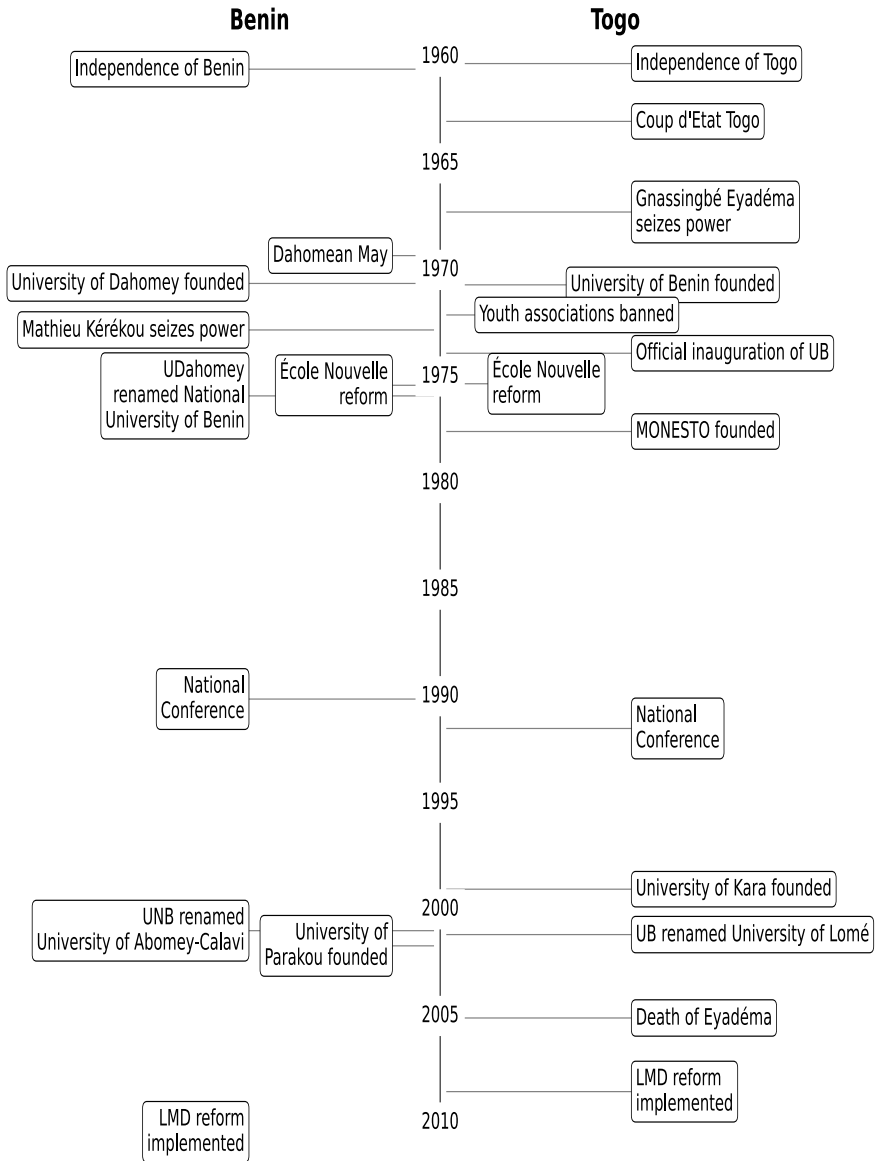


Fig. 2: Timeline of selected political and educational events.

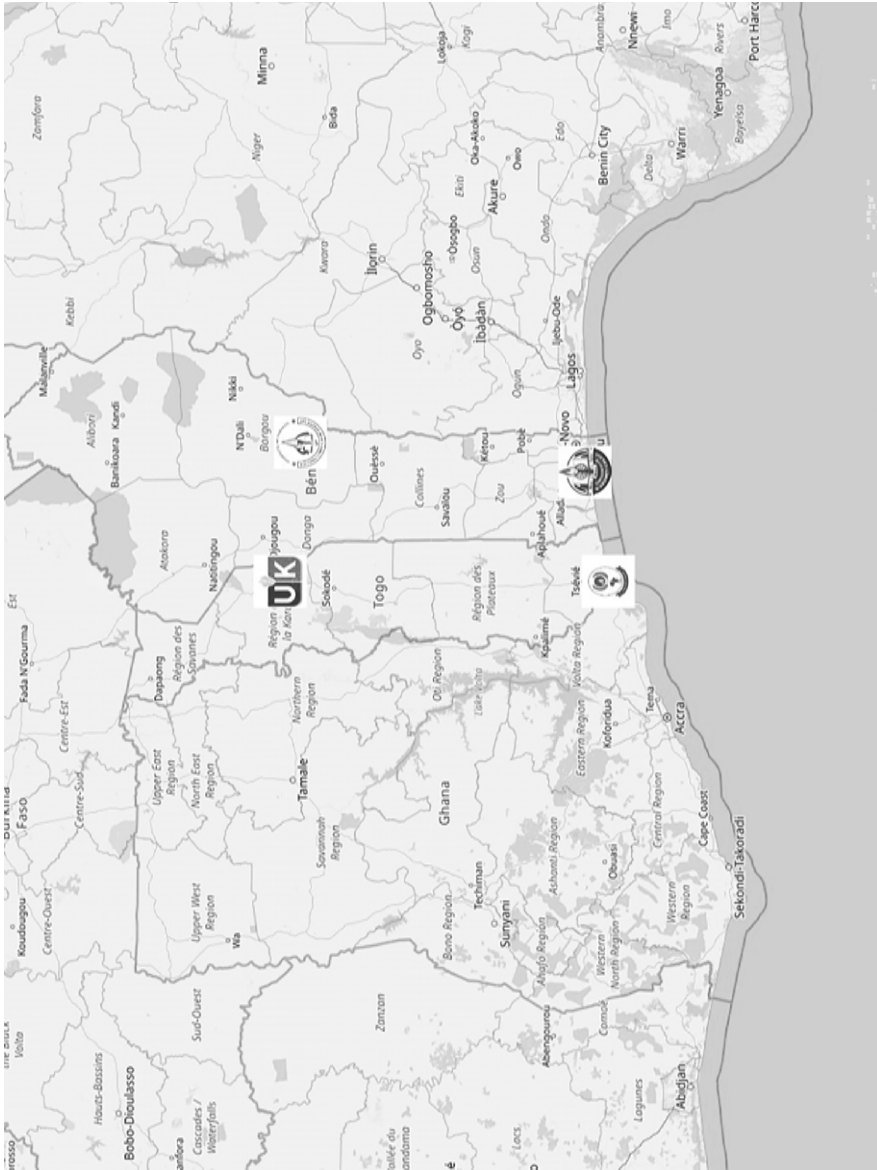


Fig. 3: Map showing the location of the main public universities in Benin and Togo.¹

¹ An interactive map (based on OpenStreetMap) showing the main locations mentioned in the book can be found at https://fmadore.github.io/Remoboko/Book_DeGruyter/Maps/points_of_interest.html, accessed 15 November 2024.

List of the Main Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACEEMUB: Association Culturelle des Étudiants et Élèves Musulmans du Bénin
ACMT: Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo
AEEMCI: Association des Élèves et Étudiants Musulmans de Côte d'Ivoire
AEEMT: Association des Élèves et Étudiants Musulmans au Togo
AETB: Association des Étudiants Togolais de l'Université de Bénin
AIMB: Amicale des Intellectuels Musulmans du Bénin
AMA: Africa Muslims Agency
AOF: Afrique-Occidentale française
CCT: Conseil Chrétien du Togo
CCU: Centre Catholique Universitaire
CEB: Conférence Épiscopale du Bénin
CEPEB: Conseil des Églises Protestantes Évangéliques du Bénin
CIMEF: Colloque International des Musulmans de l'Espace Francophone
CIPB: Conseil Interconfessionnel Protestant du Bénin
CIUB: Communauté Islamique Universitaire du Bénin
CEMK: Cercle des Élèves Musulmans de Kara
CET: Conférence Épiscopale du Togo
COUS: Centre des Œuvres Universitaires et Sociales
CV-AV: Cœurs Vaillants-Âmes Vaillantes
FEANF: Fédération des Étudiants d'Afrique Noire en France
FEMEB: Fédération des Églises et Missions Évangéliques du Bénin
FNEB: Fédération Nationale des Étudiants du Bénin
GBEEB: Groupe Biblique des Élèves et Étudiants du Bénin
GBU: Groupe Biblique Universitaire
GBUAF: Groupes Bibliques Universitaires d'Afrique Francophone
GBUST: Groupes Bibliques Universitaires et Scolaires du Togo
GMR: Gouvernement Militaire Révolutionnaire
GRAD: Groupe de Réflexion et d'Action des jeunes pour la Démocratie
HaCAME: Haut Conseil de Coordination des Associations et Mouvements Estudiantins
IESB: Institut d'Enseignement Supérieur du Bénin
IFES: International Fellowship of Evangelical Students
ILACI: Institut de Langue Arabe et de la Culture Islamique
IMF: International Monetary Fund
IYCS: International Young Catholic Students
JEAT: Jeunesse Estudiantine Adventiste du Togo
JEC: Jeunesse Étudiante Catholique
JEC-U: JEC-Universitaire
JEIUB: Jeunesse Estudiantine Islamique de l'Université du Bénin

JRPT: Jeunesse du Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais

LMD: Licence-Master-Doctorate

MIEC/IMCS: Mouvement International des Étudiants Catholiques / International Movement of Catholic Students

MOJIST: Mouvement de la Jeunesse Islamique du Togo

MONESTO: Mouvement National des Étudiants et Stagiaires Togolais

OIC: Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (formerly Organisation of the Islamic Conference)

OJEMAO: Organisation de la Jeunesse Musulmane en Afrique de l'Ouest

PRPB: Parti de la Révolution Populaire du Bénin

RAI-Bénin: Réseau des Associations et ONG Islamiques du Bénin

RAJA: Réseau des Anciens Jécistes d'Afrique

RAJEC: Réseau des Anciens Jécistes

RPT: Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais

SAPs: Structural Adjustment Programmes

UAC: Université d'Abomey-Calavi

UB: Université du Bénin (Lomé)

UGEED: Union Générale des Étudiants et Élèves du Dahomey

UIB: Union Islamique du Bénin

UID: Union Islamique du Dahomey

UL: Université de Lomé

UMT: Union Musulmane du Togo

UNETO: Union Nationale des Étudiants Togolais

UNB: Université Nationale du Bénin

UNEB: Union Nationale des Étudiants du Bénin

UNSEB: Union Nationale des Scolaires et Étudiants du Bénin

WAMY: World Assembly of Muslim Youth

WICS: World Islamic Call Society

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Preface

African dynamics, if I may borrow the phrase from the title of a book series (Brill), have been marked and perhaps even shaped by religious ideas, agendas, and actors. This has become even more conspicuous since the 1990s, with many countries transitioning to constitutional governance, adopting political liberalism and promoting civil liberties. As we are now realising, far from being a mere bystander in the last few decades, organised religion – Islam and Christianity, in particular – has been central to those dynamics, as it offers new opportunities for civic action, refashions modes of social organisation, and inspires alternative visions of communal life. Cultivating, mobilising, and building on religious identities has, in that context, become a major trend. In Sub-Saharan Africa in particular, it is hard to find a sociopolitical context that has remained untouched by these developments. Obviously, not all countries have been affected the same way; religiosity has not always taken the same form, and religion has not always referred to the same traditions, norms, and values.

Thanks to the Big Two, as one may call Islam and Christianity, a new interest in religiosity arose, becoming relevant even in settings in which it was rather unexpected. Take the case of university campuses, which, until recently have primarily promoted an intellectual culture and a political environment that hardly recognised any value in religiosity. In fact, opposition to religious ideas and institutions was a norm, and often necessary for individuals seeking to legitimise their credentials and secure status. Historically, and in Africa too, university campuses have been prime loci of the cultivation of secular and Marxist ideologies, known for their criticism of religion.

As Madore's book shows, a closer look at university campuses would have us rewrite the story today. Not many can hold and defend the radically secular and irreligious stance that was so dominant in those settings just a few decades ago. A multitude of religion-inspired initiatives have emerged across campuses, while individuals, groups, and organisations have found ways to wed religious imagination and social creativity that feed new perspectives on religion, secularism, and education. Keeping true to their reputation as dynamic sites of contestation, activism, and resistance, university campuses too, have offered religious actors and agendas a socially strategic stage, to say the least.

Of course, the fortunes of religion on campus need to be historicised in relation to other trends both on campus and within society. That is exactly what Madore's intervention as a historian offers us. There is no need to say that, for the social scientist, it is not enough to claim that religion has been a factor; one must demonstrate it. Let's then ask the question: what part does religion play in the making of university campuses? Some may think of the question as nonsensical and redundant,

especially given the claims that the university is a secular institution. However, we know that the historical trajectories of many universities in Africa and beyond challenge the radical secular narrative: both in their past and current states, education policies and the universities they lead to, have been intricately tied to religious ideas and institutions. Furthermore, in many contexts, discipleship, studentship, and scholarship find motives in religious norms while religiosity manifests itself in educational settings under various guises.

I don't mean to say that religiosity has always determined the university as an educational institution. Following this book, I rather urge a bit more historical perspective. Along the way, I also invite us to acknowledge how religiosity – in its various formulations – has conditioned the experience of being a student, lecturer, or simply administrator. How did this happen? Perhaps a credible answer can only be given if we become aware of the blind spots of our historiography and engage with them. That means we might need, for example, to drop some of our assumptions about the university and pay attention to actual campus life, the student experience, and the skills that are cultivated and promoted on campuses, underground, or away from official structures. We might also need to remember that under various sociohistorical conditions, religion shaped curricula, even at times giving birth to the educational system all together. Following Madore's book, the point I would like to make is that a history of education in Africa – and perhaps even worldwide – would be ill-advised to overlook the religion factor.

As I write this preface, and reverberating with numerous other cases across West Africa, a controversy has broken out in Senegal. The prime minister has levelled criticism of restrictions on the hijab (Muslim veil) enforced by Christian schools in the country. Quite a paradox! One might say that for a few decades, governments in the region were scrambling to keep religious identity politics out of schools and curtail the influence of religious institutions in the name of *laïcité*, secularism. Looking at these and similar developments in Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, or Niger, one might even argue that religiosity has become not only an asset, but a key fortune. It has inserted itself deep into the university moral economy, making religion an essential part of the ecosystem of higher education and, along the way, has continuously changed the terms of the relationship between religion and education.

By relating the trajectory of organised religion, Madore's book tracks the formation of tertiary education in Benin and Togo. It allows us to broaden our perspective, in particular as it helps bring nuance to our view of the secular form of the university in those countries. It contributes a well-documented tale of the presence and appropriations of religion on university campuses. I take it as an invitation to further investigate the trajectory of educational institutions. Focusing on Muslim and Christian organisations, it tells the story of communal identities, social creativ-

ity, and political consciousness in a setting in which religion is hardly expected to feed such modes of existence. For both the historiography of education and a social history of religion, such a perspective matters. And not only because it documents campus experiences, but precisely because of the ways in which it helps us think about the future of the university. I am convinced that rethinking the university, as the recurring calls across Africa go, could use a perspective that looks beyond the official and academic narratives, and which digs into the actual and the social.

Abdoulaye Sounaye

August 2024

1 Introduction

In May 2019, during Ramadan, I met Yaya Assadou Kolani at the office of the *Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo* (Association of Muslim Cadres in Togo, ACMT) in Lomé. Over the course of our conversation, Kolani shared his journey from being part of a religious minority to his rise to leadership of the *Association des Élèves et Étudiants Musulmans au Togo* (Association of Muslim Pupils and Students in Togo, AEEMT) and later the ACMT. When Kolani arrived at the University of Lomé (UL) in 1995, he encountered a burgeoning Muslim student activist movement. The AEEMT, founded in 1996, responded to the need for a unified body to help Muslim students navigate a sometimes-hostile educational environment and combat societal prejudices against Islam. On campus, the AEEMT evolved beyond a platform for religious expression to offer practical support for university integration, including guidance on registration, accommodation, and campus life. This support, vital for Kolani and others, addressed not only spiritual needs but also socio-economic challenges, and included leadership training, community service, and advocacy for Muslim students' rights. After graduating, Kolani's activism continued with the ACMT, focusing on broader societal issues such as reforming the organisation of the national Muslim community. Amid the socio-political turmoil of 2017–18, Kolani gained public prominence as president of the ACMT, even appearing on *Radio France internationale* (RFI) and joining a delegation that met with the president of Ghana.¹

On a sunny Friday afternoon in March 2022, I found myself at the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC) in Benin, sitting down with Gustave Djedatin, a former leader of the *Jeunesse Étudiante Catholique* (Young Christian Students, JEC). For over two hours, we sat at a table in the bar-restaurant of the Botanical and Zoological Gardens, his enthusiasm palpable as he recounted his experiences. Djedatin's activism with the JEC began shortly after the 1990 National Conference, a watershed moment that ended Benin's Marxist-Leninist regime and ushered in democratic renewal. During the revolution, the JEC had been driven underground, operating clandestinely. He described the challenges of re-establishing the JEC in Cotonou and the joy of seeing it flourish once again at schools and universities across the country. Djedatin spoke passionately about the transformative influence of the JEC on its members, fostering not only spiritual growth but also the development of critical thinking, leadership skills, and a deep sense of social responsibility. Now a professor and former dean of the Dassa Faculty of Science and Technology at the Polytechnic University of Abomey, Djedatin attributes much of his success to the training he received at the JEC. The association, he explained, provided him with

1 Yaya Assadou Kolani and AEEMT leader, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 15 May 2019.

invaluable skills in communication, organisation, and human resource management – tools that proved crucial in his academic career and beyond.²

The stories of Kolani and Djedatin serve as compelling entry points into the world of student activism, faith, and higher education in West Africa. Their experiences encapsulate the central themes of this book, highlighting the transformative power of faith-based student associations in fostering personal growth, leadership skills, and a sense of community while navigating the complexities of political change and secular academic institutions. From the clandestine operations of the JEC during Benin's Marxist-Leninist regime, to the AEEMT's efforts to combat prejudice against Islam in Togo's education system, these stories illustrate how faith-based student groups have adapted to and shaped their socio-political environments. They demonstrate the role these associations play in providing a sense of belonging and purpose in challenging circumstances, while also serving as incubators for future leaders who engage with broader societal issues.

This book reveals the overlooked histories of Christian and Muslim student associations at the University of Abomey-Calavi in Benin and the University of Lomé in Togo since their establishment in 1970. These groups emerged amidst one-party dictatorships and have since gained prominence, challenging the secular foundations of their institutions and intertwining religious, academic, and political life on campus. Their rise prompts a reassessment of the Western academic model, particularly its secular intellectual tradition, as public universities become sites of contention reshaped by growing religious expression.

At its core, this book argues that faith-based student associations at these universities have not merely survived but thrived, demonstrating remarkable resilience and adaptability in the face of authoritarian regimes, *laïcité*, and socio-economic changes. In doing so, they have reshaped student activism and the role of religion at public universities. Central to this analysis is the concept of a 'social curriculum'³ developed by these associations, which integrates academic knowledge with spiritual and moral development. This comprehensive approach challenges the secular intellectual traditions of these universities, prompting a reassessment of religious expression within the framework of *laïcité* and religious pluralism.

By examining both Christian and Muslim student associations over five decades, this book offers a novel perspective on the interplay between religion, politics, and education in West Africa. It shows how these groups have become key sites where young people formulate and pursue their visions of a fulfilled life, navigating the challenges of economic instability and changing social norms. In an era

2 Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 11 March 2022.

3 Sounaye 2018; 2020.

of massification and graduate unemployment, this social curriculum has become increasingly critical, offering students a holistic education that prepares them for the challenges of post-university life while providing alternative pathways to fulfilment and success.

1.1 Benin and Togo: A Comparative Framework for Exploring Faith-Based Student Activism in West Africa

Benin and Togo, two francophone countries on the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa with populations of 14 and 9 million respectively, provide a compelling framework for a comparative study of religious activism on university campuses. These neighbouring nations share a French colonial legacy, although Togo's path to independence was more complex. Originally a German colony, Togo became a League of Nations mandate administered by Britain⁴ and France after World War I, and later a UN Trust Territory. French Togo gained autonomy in 1958 and full independence on 27 April 1960, while Dahomey⁵ (now Benin) achieved independence on 1 August 1960, after a brief period of autonomy within the French Community.

The influence of French colonialism extends beyond politics to significantly shape the educational landscape of both countries. The colonial education system, designed primarily to train administrative cadres, laid the foundation for post-colonial educational policies and university structures. This legacy profoundly influenced the early development of higher education in Benin and Togo, a topic explored in depth in Chapter 2. The persistence of French *laïcité* in this post-colonial context provides a fascinating backdrop to the emergence of religious activism on university campuses. Francophone sub-Saharan Africa has recently witnessed a revival of intense debates about *laïcité*, often in new and contested forms.⁶ As Thurston notes, *laïcité* has become a subject of negotiation involving a range of actors, including state authorities, politicians, religious leaders and movements, and the general population.⁷ Although enshrined in the constitutions of both Benin and Togo since their independence in 1960, the precise definition and implementation of *laïcité* remain controversial, particularly within the evolving landscape of higher education.

⁴ For an in-depth analysis of British Togo's integration into newly independent Ghana, see Skinner 2017.

⁵ The country became the Republic of Benin in 1975.

⁶ Sounaye 2009; Holder and Sow 2014b.

⁷ Thurston 2021.

Religious diversity and mobility are defining characteristics of both Benin and Togo, where Christianity, Islam, and traditional African religions dynamically coexist and interact. These multi-religious societies are marked by frequent conversions and interfaith marriages. While both countries have predominantly Christian populations, they also host significant Muslim minorities. The 2013 census in Benin reported 48.5% of the population as Christian, 27.7% as Muslim, and 11.6% as Vodun adherents.⁸ Similarly, the 2010 census in Togo indicated that 48.6% of the population identified as Christian, 16.1% as Muslim, and 27.7% as adherents of traditional African religions.⁹ This pluralistic environment provides a unique setting for examining how religious majority and minority statuses influence student activism, campus interactions, and political engagement.

The religious landscape of both countries has been further shaped by the rise of Pentecostal churches. While this movement can be traced back to the 1960s, it saw significant expansion in the 1980s and accelerated markedly from the early 1990s. This growth has been particularly pronounced in urban areas such as Cotonou and Lomé, largely influenced via transnational religious exchanges by charismatic, Pentecostal, and evangelical movements from neighbouring Ghana and Nigeria. A key factor in this expansion has been the media networks that disseminate new theological concepts, especially those centred on prosperity and salvation theology.¹⁰

The pluralistic religious landscapes of Benin and Togo offer ideal case studies for examining the dynamics of religious coexistence in Africa. This book contributes to a growing body of literature that moves beyond conventional narratives of conflict or interreligious dialogue, which typically emphasise either violence or tolerance. By focusing on faith-based student associations at the universities of Lomé and Abomey-Calavi, this study provides fresh insights into how religious groups navigate and shape campus life in these diverse settings.

Recent research on Christian-Muslim encounters in Africa has revealed how the long history of coexistence – and competition – between different religious groups has influenced the ways believers ‘perform’ their religions and adopt similar modes of proselytising and organisational techniques.¹¹ Larkin and Meyer’s proposal to study reformist Islam and evangelical Pentecostalism in West Africa as ‘doppelgangers’ – ‘enemies whose actions mirror each other and whose fates are

8 ‘Principaux indicateurs socio démographiques et économiques (RGPH-4, 2013),’ accessed 27 June 2024.

9 ‘Togo,’ accessed 7 December 2024. I thank Aurélien Dasré and Katrin Langewiesche for bringing these figures to my attention.

10 De Surgy 2001; Mayrargue 2001; 2004b; 2005; Noret 2004; 2005; Strandsbjerg 2005b; Fancello 2006; Piot 2010, 53–76.

11 Soares 2006; Mayrargue 2009; Janson and Meyer 2016.

largely intertwined¹² – informs this book’s comparative approach. Furthermore, as Fesenmyer, Liberatore, and Maqsood suggest, examining Islam and Christianity in tandem allows us to uncover the ‘interplays of simultaneous borrowing and boundary-making, intimacy and animosity, sharing and exclusion [...] that offer alternate models of cohabitation.’¹³

This study applies these insights to the university campuses of Lomé and Abomey-Calavi, which serve as microcosms of their nations’ religious diversity. By analysing how Christian and Muslim student groups in Benin and Togo simultaneously borrow from and differentiate themselves from one another, this book illuminates broader patterns of religious (re)composition in West Africa. It explores how these organisations define their communities and practices, often in contrast to other groups, while adopting similar strategies and techniques. Through these case studies, the book sheds light on the complex interplay of rivalry, cross-fertilisation, and multiple religious affiliations in postcolonial West African societies, demonstrating the relevance of studying faith-based student activism for understanding broader societal dynamics of religious pluralism.

The University of Abomey-Calavi and the University of Lomé, both founded in 1970, are the primary higher education institutions in their respective countries. Their origins can be traced back to the *Institut d’Enseignement Supérieur du Bénin* (IESB), established in 1965 with a science section in Porto-Novo, Dahomey, and a humanities section in Lomé. As detailed in Chapter 2, the dissolution of IESB led to the creation of these two national universities. The University of Dahomey, inaugurated in Abomey-Calavi,¹⁴ underwent several name changes, becoming the National University of Benin (UNB) in 1975 and finally the UAC in 2001. It remained Benin’s sole public university until the establishment of the University of Parakou in 2001. Despite significant expansion of the public higher education system between 2009 and 2015, including new universities in various cities and a major reorganisation in 2016,¹⁵ the UAC remains the largest institution with over 96,000 students as of the 2019–20 academic year.¹⁶

12 Larkin and Meyer 2006, 287.

13 Fesenmyer, Liberatore and Maqsood 2020, 395.

14 A few kilometres away from Cotonou.

15 Amouzouvi 2022, 125–27.

16 Mensah, ‘Année académique 2021–2022...,’ *24h au Bénin*, 29 November 2022.



Fig. 4: Main entrance of the University of Abomey-Calavi, 16 March 2022, photo by the author.

In Togo, the University of Benin (UB) in Lomé, renamed the University of Lomé (UL) in 2001, long stood as the country's only public higher education institution. Its student population has grown dramatically from a mere hundred in 1970 to 75,000 in 2022.¹⁷ The establishment of the University of Kara in 1999, operational since 2003, marked the end of UL's monopoly on public higher education in Togo. The University of Kara has also experienced significant growth, reaching over 18,000 students by 2019.¹⁸

While the institutional histories of the UAC and UL have been studied,¹⁹ recent focus has shifted to the challenges facing higher education in both countries. Since the 2000s, Benin and Togo have witnessed a proliferation of private universities, coinciding with an acute crisis in higher education characterised by a growing mismatch between university education and labour market demands. These evolving

¹⁷ 'Près de 100.000 étudiants à l'université de Lomé,' accessed 9 January 2024.

¹⁸ Aléza 2021, 38.

¹⁹ Aléza 2021; Hounzandji 2021.

dynamics and their implications are explored in more detail in Chapter 5 of this book.

Building on their shared colonial heritage and the challenges facing their higher education systems, both Benin and Togo initiated ‘revolutionary’ education reforms in the 1970s and 80s. Known as the *‘École Nouvelle’* (New School), these reforms aimed to decolonise education at all levels. In Benin, this process was accompanied by a push towards *laïcité*, which significantly impacted the UAC. Chapter 2 examines this transition stage in the development of higher education in both countries, providing a unique lens through which to study the evolution of faith-based student activism in postcolonial West Africa.

The choice of Benin is particularly compelling given the country’s reputation as the ‘Latin Quarter’ of Africa (*‘Quartier latin de l’Afrique’*). This title, first used by the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier in 1948,²⁰ reflects its profound intellectual and cultural influence during the colonial period. Benin’s exceptional concentration of educated elites, known as *‘Akowé’* in the south, included intellectuals, literary figures, and journalists who were predominantly products of Catholic schools and beneficiaries of colonial education policies. In the 1960s, UNESCO recognised Dahomey as a centre for the cultivation of intellectual capital in Africa, drawing parallels with the prestigious Latin Quarter in Paris.

The case studies of Benin and Togo are further enriched by the enduring influence of the military in shaping their post-colonial trajectories. By the early 1970s, both countries had fallen under authoritarian regimes led by military officers. Presidents Étienne Gnassingbé Eyadéma of Togo and Mathieu Kérékou of Benin, both hailing from their countries’ northern regions, maintained their military ranks while in office. This prominent role of the armed forces has been the subject of numerous comparative studies, highlighting their decisive influence on political development in both nations.²¹ As we will see in Chapter 2, both regimes sought to maintain tight control over the university and its key actors in the 1970s and 1980s.

The contrasting paths to democratisation in the early 1990s is another compelling aspect. As Chapter 4 will explore, this period marked a pivotal juncture for both countries, with economic challenges and international pressure testing the resilience of their authoritarian regimes. Student movements emerged as key drivers of change during this transformative period, adding significance to the study of faith-based student associations. While Benin is often cited as a successful example of democratic transition – despite recent backsliding – Togo exemplifies a

²⁰ Mounier 1948.

²¹ Decalo 1990; Houngnikpo 2000; Morency-Laflamme 2018.

case of stalled democratisation.²² This divergence in political outcomes provides a rich comparative framework for examining the role of faith-based student activism in these evolving contexts.

Religion has been a constant in the political arenas of Benin and Togo since independence, significantly impacting university campuses. The intertwining of politics and religion in these countries is marked by substantial state intervention in religious affairs. As Tall notes, ‘the irreducible political will to intervene in religious affairs is evident throughout Benin’s history.’²³ Similarly, Toulabor discusses how President Eyadéma of Togo strictly regulated religion, establishing ‘eyadémistic ecumenism,’ (*œcuménisme eyadémistique*), in which religious leaders competed to praise the head of state.²⁴ Recent developments have seen Muslims, traditionally marginal in the political landscape, becoming more prominent in political debates. The anti-government protests in Togo in 2017 and 2018 marked a turning point, with figures like Tikpi Salifou Atchadam building significant grassroots followings within the Muslim community.²⁵ In Benin, the traditionally quiet Muslim minority has become increasingly active in national debates, exemplified by the election of an imam to the National Assembly in 2019.²⁶

In sum, the comparison between Benin and Togo provides a rich framework for examining religious activism on university campuses. These neighbouring countries, with their shared French colonial legacy, similar educational structures, and diverse religious landscapes, offer unique insights into the dynamics of faith-based student engagement. Their contrasting paths to democratisation, coupled with the enduring influence of the military and the complex interplay between politics and religion, create a compelling comparative context. The universities of Abomey-Calavi and Lomé, as microcosms of their respective societies, serve as ideal case studies for exploring how religious pluralism, state secularism, and student activism intersect in postcolonial West Africa. By examining these parallels and divergences, this study aims to shed light on broader patterns of religious coexistence, competition, and transformation in the region’s higher education institutions.

²² Houngnikpo 2001; Seely 2009.

²³ Tall 1995, 195.

²⁴ Toulabor 1993.

²⁵ Madore 2021.

²⁶ Madore 2022a.

1.2 Beyond Secular Student Activism: Faith-Based Student Associations and the Evolving Landscape of African Campus Politics

This book offers a fresh perspective on African student movements by focusing on faith-based student associations in Benin and Togo. These groups are redefining traditional leadership dynamics and challenging the secular narrative that has dominated scholarship in this field. While university students constitute a minority within their societies – with gross enrolment rates for tertiary education²⁷ at 10.8% in Benin²⁸ and 15.1% in Togo,²⁹ compared to 75% in Germany³⁰ – their impact on national politics and social change is significant. Previous studies have widely acknowledged the significant contribution of student activism in shaping the political and social landscape of sub-Saharan Africa. These movements have been central to major political upheavals and regime changes, extending their influence from the academic sphere to the wider socio-political arena. They have organised protests and campaigns for social justice, democracy, and human rights, shaping political discourse in their countries.³¹ Characterised by their anti-establishment stance, African student movements have consistently challenged prevailing norms, regardless of the ruling regime.³² The evolution of former student union leaders into heads of state, such as Laurent Gbagbo of Côte d'Ivoire and Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger, illustrates the profound political trajectories that such movements can set in motion.

Student movements have also been pivotal in the struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism. The *Fédération des Étudiants d'Afrique Noire en France* (Federation of Black African Students in France, FEANF) exemplifies this commitment, having worked tirelessly to secure full independence for francophone African nations. Employing tactics such as public statements, protests, and international relations, the FEANF was a leading force in the anti-colonial movement. Drawing

27 The average for sub-Saharan Africa is 9.4%. It should be noted that gross enrolment does not take into account completion rates and may be inflated in countries with large numbers of international students.

28 <https://unevoc.unesco.org/home/Dynamic+TVET+Country+Profiles/country=BEN>, accessed 21 November 2021.

29 <https://unevoc.unesco.org/home/Dynamic+TVET+Country+Profiles/country=TGO>, accessed 21 November 2021.

30 <https://unevoc.unesco.org/home/Dynamic+TVET+Country+Profiles/country=DEU>, accessed 21 November 2021.

31 Klemenčič, Luescher and Mugume 2016.

32 Bianchini 2022.

on their French university education and Marxist literature, they challenged colonial authority and championed African cultural values.³³ Post-independence, the FEANF shifted its focus to resisting neo-colonialism and imperialism, serving as a training ground for Africa's future elite.³⁴

During the decolonisation era, African student movements were profoundly shaped by Marxism-Leninism and Pan-African solidarity, influenced by experiences in both foreign and African universities. This exposure to global ideological currents often positioned them in opposition to the agendas of newly independent states.³⁵ However, these movements were far from monolithic, experiencing internal ideological divisions that oscillated between revolutionary and reformist factions. Debates over ideological purity and strategic approaches were common, reflecting a rich spectrum of thought within these groups.³⁶ This diversity typically manifested in pro-Soviet, pro-Maoist, and pro-Albanian factions, mirroring global ideological cleavages such as the Sino-Soviet split.³⁷ Campus debates frequently spilled over into broader national political discourses, with many students assuming prominent public roles or joining ruling or opposition parties. During this period, student activism and state authority became closely intertwined, navigating obstacles and confrontations amidst economic downturns, structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), and escalating authoritarianism in the 1980s.³⁸ The ideals nurtured in the university environment were tested against the harsh realities of post-independence governance.

The University of Abomey-Calavi and the University of Lomé, like many national universities in sub-Saharan Africa, have been highly politicised institutions since their inception, often serving as epicentres of major student protests and strikes. The early 1990s saw student unions, in alliance with trade unions and civil society groups, play a pivotal role in challenging the authoritarian regimes of Kérékou in Benin and Eyadéma in Togo. The National Conference in Benin in February 1990 marked a watershed moment, heralding the first democratic overthrow of a military dictatorship in Africa and setting a precedent for the region. In Togo, despite a thwarted democratic transition and the enduring rule of the Gnassingbé family, student movements have remained at the forefront of opposition to the state. These

33 Dieng 2009; Blum 2015.

34 Blum 2017.

35 Hodgkinson and Melchiorre 2019.

36 Diallo 2023.

37 Smirnova 2019.

38 Federici, Caffentzis and Alidou 2000; Zeilig 2007; Hodgkinson and Melchiorre 2019.

examples underscore the significant political impact of student activism in shaping national politics and driving social change in both countries.

While student movements have been influential in shaping national politics, it is crucial to recognise that universities themselves are microcosms of broader societal dynamics. The history of faith-based student associations at the University of Abomey-Calavi and the University of Lomé illuminates the complex power relations that shape campus life. Throughout the period under study, various external forces – including political bodies, religious organisations, and NGOs – have sought to influence campus dynamics, often reflecting larger socio-political agendas. Simultaneously, internal campus events and ideologies have played a role in shaping the wider societal context. This interplay between campus life and external forces reveals an intricate network of influence that extends beyond the university into national and religious politics.

Recent scholarship has turned its attention to African students' participation in the global protest movement of 1968, characterised by widespread revolutionary student uprisings across continents. This renewed historiographical interest, driven by the 'global turn' in social sciences since the mid-2000s, is reassessing the '1968s' – a term encapsulating the global scale of these student protests.³⁹ For instance, Hendrickson's analysis of interrelated student movements in Tunis, Paris, and Dakar demonstrates their mutual influence and contribution to the broader political landscape. This work illustrates how these movements were linked to wider international issues, engaging with key events in Algeria, Ghana, Vietnam, and Palestine, emphasising the global consciousness and solidarity of student activists in transnational struggles.⁴⁰

Despite the significant role university students play in reflecting and shaping societal dynamics, existing literature has largely overlooked the influence of religious student organisations in these processes. Bianchini's work, for instance, identifies three distinct 'ages' that capture the socio-political impact of these movements in Francophone Africa: the independence and pan-African unity era (early 1950s to early 1960s), the anti-imperialist era (late 1960s-early 1980s), and the era of resistance to SAPs and advocacy for democratic reforms (1990s onwards).⁴¹ However, this framework, like much of the existing scholarship, tends to overlook the contributions and influences of religious student organisations during these transformative periods.

³⁹ Blum, Guidi and Rillon 2016a; Gueye 2017.

⁴⁰ Hendrickson 2022.

⁴¹ Bianchini 2016.

This book addresses this gap by examining how faith-based student associations are redefining traditional leadership dynamics at Benin and Togo's universities. Unlike their secular counterparts, these religious groups are strategically positioning themselves as moral arbiters within the student population, cultivating a leadership ethos based on neutrality that transcends typical ideological and political divisions. Their involvement in university crises and emerging recognition as legitimate stakeholders mark a significant shift in campus dynamics.

By focusing on the intersection of religion and university life through the lens of faith-based student associations, this research provides unique insights into how religious identities and practices are shaping the next generation of political, social, and religious leaders in Benin and Togo. It examines not only how these associations navigate internal campus dynamics but also how they interact with and are influenced by external socio-political and religious forces. This approach challenges the prevailing narrative of African student activism as primarily driven by secular, revolutionary, or corporatist ideologies, presenting a more complex and nuanced picture of student engagement.

The book examines the evolving role of the emerging elite educated at the UAC and UL in publicly expressing views that differ from those of the 'official' or self-appointed leaders of their religious communities. The analysis looks at how faith-based student associations generally adhere to the broader guidelines of their religious groups, but occasionally act as dissenters, especially when representatives of the national religious community appear to be entangled in political agendas. The book explores shifts in religious authority and the possibility that traditional religious figures may lose influence or followers due to campus dynamics. This aspect is crucial to understanding the changing face of religious leadership and the impact of student associations on traditional religious structures.

Furthermore, by examining these faith-based student associations over several decades, this study offers valuable insights into the evolving relationship between religion, education, and politics in post-colonial Africa. It demonstrates how these groups have adapted to changing political contexts, from authoritarian regimes to periods of democratisation, offering a unique perspective on broader societal transformations in Benin and Togo. Despite their numerical minority, studying these faith-based student associations provides a window into the evolving dynamics of religion, education, and politics in these countries, and by extension, in post-colonial Africa more broadly. This approach not only fills a significant gap in the literature but also contributes to our understanding of how religious activism on university campuses reflects and shapes broader societal transformations in the post-colonial era.

1.3 Religious Resurgence on Campus: A Comparative and Historical Perspective on Faith-Based Student Activism in Africa

The transformation of university campuses into vibrant arenas of religious expression and negotiation has emerged as a significant phenomenon across sub-Saharan Africa, particularly since the socio-political liberalisation of the 1990s. This trend, observed in both Christian and Muslim contexts, has profoundly impacted campus life, challenging long-standing secular identities and reshaping student dynamics. Studies have documented the rise of charismatic Christian movements at Nigerian universities⁴² and the spread of Pentecostalism to such institutions as the University of Zimbabwe and South African universities. These churches have gained popularity by addressing students' spiritual needs and material concerns amidst high unemployment and uncertainty.⁴³ Similar patterns of Christian activism have been observed in Uganda and Cameroon, where religious engagement helps students navigate challenging employment landscapes through supportive networks and practical experiences.⁴⁴

Paralleling this Christian revival, Islamic activism has gained prominence, particularly in francophone West Africa. At Senegal's Cheikh Anta Diop University, the *Association des Étudiants Musulmans de l'Université de Dakar* (Association of Muslim Students of the University of Dakar, AEMUD) exemplifies a shift towards a more overt Islamic cultural identity, moving away from Western institutional frameworks.⁴⁵ This trend, described as the 'decomplexification' of religion and the 'communitarisation' of the academic environment, reflects broader societal changes.⁴⁶ Similar developments have been observed in Nigeria,⁴⁷ Niger,⁴⁸ and Burkina Faso,⁴⁹ where Muslim student associations are challenging traditional religious authorities and reshaping campus dynamics. Notably, Salafism has gained traction among students at universities in Niger⁵⁰ and Côte d'Ivoire,⁵¹ positioned as a

⁴² Ojo 1988; 2007.

⁴³ Gukurume 2018; 2022.

⁴⁴ Schulz and Bayer 2023; Kuaté 2023.

⁴⁵ Piga 2005; Gomez-Perez 2008; Amo 2018.

⁴⁶ Camara and Bodian 2016.

⁴⁷ Balogun 2022.

⁴⁸ Bello Adamou and Oumarou 2022; Favier 2022.

⁴⁹ Vanvyve 2016.

⁵⁰ Sounaye 2018.

⁵¹ Madore and Binaté 2023.

symbol of modernity and a break with traditional structures. The impact of Salafism on campus dynamics in Benin and Togo will be explored in depth in Chapter 5.

These religious movements have transformed campuses into spaces in which spiritual activities are as prominent as academic pursuits. Universities have become centres of both scientific learning and spiritual exploration, with religiosity emerging as a central reference point shaping students' norms, identities, and behaviours. This shift has placed universities at the heart of debates between secular and religious ideologies, challenging campus authorities to balance pluralism with secularism while maintaining educational goals.⁵² The rise of religious activism on these campuses calls for a reassessment of the Western academic model, particularly its secular intellectual tradition. As religiosity increasingly influences the university ethos, the status of public universities as secular institutions is challenged, leading to a transformation of their role and function. In these environments, students actively seek ways to manifest their religious identities. They establish sacred spaces on campus, creating a 'home away from home'⁵³ that fosters a sense of community central to their academic success. Universities generally strive to accommodate diverse religious practices, with some groups having dedicated buildings, others using shared facilities, and some adapting to online meetings. However, access to these spaces often reflects wider inequalities in religious representation on campus.

University administrators and faculty face the dual responsibility of regulating religious spaces and practices whilst striving to maintain a balance between *laïcité* and religious pluralism. Notably, those entrusted with upholding the secular character of the university are often found endorsing or facilitating religious activities, further complicating the landscape. This book examines how state and university officials have managed religious expression since 1970, acknowledging the diverse approaches to *laïcité* adopted by different political regimes and leaders. It explores how public universities in Benin and Togo have responded to the growing presence of religious expression, providing insights into the evolving relationship between faith and secular education in francophone West Africa.

The growing religiosity on campuses has also raised concerns about potential conflicts and radicalisation. Campus violence and radicalism have long been significant concerns in African higher education. These issues often involve complex interactions between student movements, state actors, and inter-group rivalries.⁵⁴ Recent scholarship has highlighted concerns about religious movements on cam-

52 Villalón and Bodian 2020; Sounaye and Madore 2023.

53 Schmalzbauer 2023.

54 Konaté 2003; Chouli 2018; Smirnova and Noûs 2020.

puses, particularly in the context of jihadist activities in the Sahel region. Studies across West Africa have examined the impact of these developments on Muslim students and the challenges of managing religious diversity in educational settings. While some scholars have framed these phenomena in terms of ‘extremism,’⁵⁵ ‘radicalism,’⁵⁶ or ‘white-collar fundamentalism,’⁵⁷ this book takes a more nuanced approach. Such terminology, often used uncritically in academic and policy contexts, can oversimplify complex religious dynamics and potentially stigmatise certain groups. Instead, it examines religious student movements within the broader context of education, secularism, state policies, and the socio-political environment of West Africa. The study explores how these groups contribute to campus life, shape student identities, and engage with broader societal issues, moving beyond reductive categorisations to capture the complexity of religious expression in academic settings.

The complexities of managing religious diversity on campus are further illustrated by students’ attitudes towards *laïcité*. While the majority of students in religious associations support the principle of *laïcité*, there is a sense of unease among some Muslim students in countries like Benin and Togo. They perceive the state’s implementation of secularism as imbalanced, with Christianity often being privileged over other religions. This highlights ongoing challenges in balancing religious expression with secular principles in academic settings.

While existing research has provided valuable insights, it has two notable limitations. Firstly, most studies focus on specific religious groups – either Christian or Muslim – with a lack of comparative analysis across faiths. Secondly, there is a dearth of long-term studies of faith-based student activism, with much of the literature emphasising recent developments and inadvertently suggesting that the prominence of religious groups only emerged with the democratic transitions of the 1990s. This book addresses these gaps by offering a comparative, historical study of both Christian and Muslim student associations in Benin and Togo. By tracing their emergence under authoritarian regimes in the 1970s and 1980s and their subsequent evolution, it provides a comprehensive understanding of religious activism in African universities over several decades. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how these groups have navigated changing political landscapes, shaped campus dynamics, and influenced broader societal trends, moving beyond simplistic narratives to capture the complexity of religious expression in academic settings.

55 Kendhammer and Ousmanou 2019.

56 Dumbe and Bob-Milliar 2022.

57 Obadare 2007.

1.4 University, Aspirations, and Future Making: Pursuing the Good Life in Uncertain Times

Universities in sub-Saharan Africa have long been crucibles of social and political transformation, evolving from training grounds for administrative elites to catalysts for individual and collective aspirations. This book argues that faith-based student associations have become key sites where young people articulate and pursue their conceptions of the good life amidst economic uncertainty and shifting societal expectations. The trajectories of African universities reflect broader societal changes. Initially instruments of nation-building and modernisation in the 1960s, these institutions embodied the aspirations of newly independent states, carrying the hopes of entire communities.⁵⁸ A university degree once guaranteed prosperity and social prestige, with graduates often joining state administrations and playing crucial roles in national development.⁵⁹ However, since the late 1970s, economic downturns have drastically altered this landscape. Austerity measures imposed by international financial institutions, reduced government support, and widespread underemployment have disrupted the once-clear path from academic achievement to professional success.

These challenges have been compounded by the complex relationships between universities, the state, and the broader political economy. While early post-independence universities supported nationalist development agendas, they later suffered from economic crises, repressive state control, and the imposition of neo-liberal policies like structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). The politicisation of universities has manifested through governmental interference in appointments, funding cuts, and suppression of academic freedom.⁶⁰ Simultaneously, universities have been sites of resistance, with academics and unions pushing back against state control and advocating for autonomy and improved conditions. However, this resistance is complicated by universities' continued dependence on state funding.⁶¹

The underfunding and neglect of public universities, coupled with the rise of private institutions, has led to declining quality and brain drain. These issues have been further exacerbated by the massification of higher education since the 1990s. The dramatic increase in student numbers, fuelled by the expansion of primary and secondary education, has led to over-enrolment in public universities and a

58 Hodgkinson and Melchiorre 2019.

59 Assié-Lumumba 2011; Livsey 2017.

60 Somparé and Somparé 2023.

61 Arowosegbe 2023.

further decline in educational quality.⁶² Between 2000 and 2010, tertiary enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa more than doubled, reaching 5.2 million students.⁶³ This growth, while democratising access to higher education, has also intensified the competition for increasingly scarce employment opportunities. Consequently, student activism has shifted from an elitist perspective to an unprecedented alliance with the working classes,⁶⁴ as students grapple with the uncertain future that awaits them post-graduation.

This massification of higher education, coupled with economic challenges, political unrest, and neoliberal reforms, has blurred a once clear path to secure employment, respectable adulthood, and elite status. The reality now is that direct career paths following academic qualifications are rare. Graduates often find themselves in temporary jobs unrelated to their studies, sometimes unpaid, in stark contrast to the promises of university education and a blow to their economic and social autonomy. Engeler and Steuer have explored this phenomenon by examining the evolving aspirations and life plans of young graduates. They portray the future as full of possibilities, but also full of uncertainties. Their analysis highlights the complexities graduates face in navigating this unpredictable environment, often balancing multiple roles such as parenting, entrepreneurship, and involvement in political and religious groups.⁶⁵ Smith-Hefner and Inhorn have used the concept of ‘waithood’ to describe this period of exploration and potential, during which graduates seek employment, build networks, and pursue personal growth. It is characterised by a juxtaposition of disillusionment with societal realities and the pursuit of individual goals.⁶⁶

Mazzocchetti’s exploration of the lives of undergraduate and recent graduate students at the University of Ouagadougou further illuminates the complex pursuit of the good life in contemporary African university settings. In overcrowded lecture halls, students demonstrate remarkable adaptability and resourcefulness as they confront daily survival challenges amidst intergenerational debt and socio-economic hardship. Their quest for a meaningful and prosperous life is fraught with contradictions, exemplified by the dissonance between their ambitions for ‘modern’ success through education and the devaluation of their academic credentials. These students aspire to participate in the globalised world portrayed in media, a vision that, while glimpsed by some, remains largely elusive and imagi-

⁶² Mohamedbhai 2008.

⁶³ Provini, Mayrargue, and Chitou 2020.

⁶⁴ Zeilig 2009.

⁶⁵ Engeler and Steuer 2017.

⁶⁶ Smith-Hefner and Inhorn 2020.

nary for many. The precariousness of their lives stands in stark contrast to their aspirations to become part of the emerging elite.⁶⁷

This book aims to provide a more comprehensive exploration of university life, with a particular focus on the significant impact of non-academic experiences. It argues that a nuanced understanding of university dynamics requires an examination that goes beyond the academic curriculum to include the diverse experiences central to personal development. At universities, learning extends beyond formal curricula to encompass a range of campus experiences that hone practical skills critical to students' future professional careers. While academic pursuits remain central, students often acquire a wide range of skills that extend well beyond their chosen disciplines. These skills often pave the way for unexpected career paths and contribute significantly to the social and political prominence of graduates.

Central to this narrative is the influential role of faith-based student associations in shaping the university experience through a 'social curriculum.' This term, borrowed from Sounaye,⁶⁸ refers to the informal but crucial aspect of education that takes place alongside, and sometimes overshadows, formal academic learning. Going beyond mere religious guidance, these groups have a profound impact on students' character and social outlook, blending academic, spiritual, and moral development. In the context of Togolese and Beninese universities, which are currently struggling with rising enrolments and graduate unemployment, these associations are evolving beyond their traditional functions. They have become dynamic platforms for socialisation, transmitting a wide range of skills, norms, and moral values. They are instrumental in shaping the character of students, encouraging them to become moral role models and leaders committed to community service and the common good. Furthermore, they provide invaluable assistance to students in navigating the challenges of campus life and developing effective survival strategies.

In this context of uncertainty and aspiration, the concept of the good life offers a compelling lens through which this book examines the interplay of ethics, morals, politics, and religion within faith-based student associations in Togo and Benin. As universities grapple with funding shortfalls, massification, and organisational issues in a neoliberal educational environment, these associations have emerged as important spaces in which students negotiate and construct their visions of a desirable future. This study posits that faith-based associations provide a unique arena in which ethical considerations, moral values, political engagement, and religious beliefs converge. The social curriculum offered by these groups not only comple-

⁶⁷ Mazzocchetti 2009.

⁶⁸ Sounaye 2018; 2020.

ments formal academic training but also helps students navigate an increasingly precarious job market and uncertain future. These associations offer alternative pathways to fulfilment and success, allowing students to reconcile their global aspirations with local realities.

Moreover, this book argues that these associations are contributing significantly to the formation of a new religious elite. As religious identity gains prominence among students and professors, these groups play a crucial role in redefining what it means to lead a good and successful life in contemporary African societies. They offer a counternarrative to purely materialistic definitions of success, emphasising spiritual growth, ethical leadership, and community service.

By examining faith-based student associations through the lens of the good life, this study illuminates how young people in Togo and Benin are actively shaping their futures and reimagining the role of higher education in their societies. It explores how these associations serve as laboratories for developing new forms of ethical leadership, moral reasoning, political engagement, and religious practice, all in pursuit of a vision of the good life that is both personally fulfilling and socially transformative. This approach allows us to move beyond simplistic narratives of decline or crisis in African higher education. Instead, it reveals the complex ways in which students are adapting to and reshaping their educational landscapes, using faith-based associations as vehicles for personal growth, community building, and societal change. By focusing on these dynamics in Togo and Benin, this book contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the evolving role of religion at African universities and its impact on students' aspirations and life trajectories.

While drawing inspiration from scholarship on youth aspirations and 'wait-hood' in Africa, this book extends the analysis by examining how faith-based associations provide structure and meaning during this uncertain period. It explores how these groups offer students alternative frameworks for conceptualising and pursuing the good life, helping them navigate the complexities of 'wait-hood' while fostering personal development and community engagement.

1.5 A History of Activism and Organised Religion on Campus: Bridging History and Anthropology

The challenges of documenting the history of faith-based student organisations are vividly illustrated by an anecdote from a former leader of the AEEMT at the University of Lomé. In a YouTube video, he recounts the loss of a registration notebook that chronicled the association's history from the late 1980s – a vital link between

past and present generations of activists.⁶⁹ This loss, whether through neglect or deliberate action, exemplifies the fragility of preserving student movement histories in Togo and Benin. Such incidents are not unique to the AEEMT. They reflect a broader challenge in historical research on student movements in contexts in which archival maintenance has been inconsistent and often subject to the shifting priorities of association leaders.

Despite these obstacles, this book draws upon extensive empirical research conducted over several years. By combining various methodological approaches and diverse sources, I have reconstructed a comprehensive narrative of faith-based student activism on these campuses. My multifaceted approach integrates institutional, global, and local history with anthropological insights to provide a nuanced understanding of faith-based student activism in Benin and Togo.

This methodology allows me to examine the interplay between university structures, national political regimes, and transnational religious movements, situating campus dynamics within broader historical contexts. Through this lens, I can trace the evolution of religious student associations from their emergence in the 1970s to the present day, highlighting how they have both shaped and been shaped by the changing landscape of higher education in West Africa. By bridging historical analysis with anthropological perspectives, this study offers a rich, contextualised account of how these faith-based student organisations have navigated and influenced the academic, social, and political spheres of their respective campuses and beyond. This approach not only illuminates the specific experiences of Christian and Muslim student groups in Benin and Togo but also contributes to broader discussions on the role of religion at public universities and the dynamics of student activism in postcolonial Africa.

The book draws on a variety of sources, including oral history interviews, participant observation, and an extensive collection of written materials. The research involved several rounds of ethnographic fieldwork in Cotonou/Abomey-Calavi and Lomé, spanning nine months across 2019, 2021, 2022, and 2024. During these visits, I conducted 81 formal interviews and focus groups in French with current and former activists of prominent Christian and Islamic student associations at the UAC and UL. These conversations extended to religious leaders such as imams and chaplains serving student communities, as well as university professors and administrators. The formal interviews, 39 in Benin and 42 in Togo, were complemented by numerous informal conversations with activists from various groups. While most of my interviewees held positions of responsibility, I also engaged with grassroots activ-

69 AEEMT, 'Historique de l'AEEMT: histoire de la section UL,' uploaded 29 June 2022.

ists. Additionally, I attended various events organised by these faith-based student associations, providing firsthand observations of their activities and dynamics.

It is important to note that the predominantly male composition of my informants reflects the wider male dominance in leadership roles within Islamic and Christian student associations. This gender imbalance is partly a reflection of the broader university demographics, where women are statistically less numerous and generally underrepresented. However, it is worth noting that Christian groups have had female leaders. Within Islamic associations, while women may not typically aspire to the position of national leader (Amir), there is a long-standing tradition of allocating the Vice-Amirate role specifically to a woman, in addition to organising activities exclusively for female students.

As a male researcher, I encountered specific challenges in studying female activism within Islamic associations. Islamic norms were often invoked to justify the presence of a third party, typically male, during interviews with ‘sisters’ (*sœurs*). This practice inevitably influenced the discourse of the women being interviewed. Throughout the book, gender dynamics and women’s participation in these movements are addressed where relevant. However, it is important to acknowledge that this aspect merits more in-depth study, ideally by researchers who can navigate the gender-specific cultural and religious norms more freely.

To maintain a coherent comparative analysis, this study focuses primarily on three major religious organisations in both countries. These are:

- Catholic: *Jeunesse Étudiante Catholique* (Young Christian Students, JEC)
- Evangelical/Pentecostal: *Groupe Biblique des Élèves et Étudiants du Bénin* (Bible Group of Pupils and Students of Benin, GBEEB) and *Groupes Bibliques Universitaires et Scolaires du Togo* (Togo University and School Bible Groups, GBUST)
- Islamic: *Association Culturelle des Étudiants et Élèves Musulmans du Bénin* (Cultural Association of Muslim Students and Pupils of Benin, ACEEMUB) and *Association des Élèves et Étudiants Musulmans au Togo* (Association of Muslim Pupils and Students in Togo, AEEMT)

It should be noted that many other religious associations are active on these two campuses, including the Assemblies of God, Charismatic Renewal, *Campus pour Christ*, *Jeunesse Estudiantine Adventiste du Togo* (Adventist Student Youth of Togo, JEAT), and *Union des Étudiants Chrétiens Célestes* (Union of Celestial Christian Students). The research was conducted in French, reflecting its status as the official language and the predominant medium of communication on campus.

My positionality as a white Western researcher significantly influenced my fieldwork experiences and access to different religious groups. I found it relatively easier to establish rapport and gain access to Christian associations, likely due to perceived religious affinities. While this facilitated open and immediate connec-

tions, it is important to acknowledge that this ease of access may have shaped the depth and nature of the information shared, potentially influencing my observations and conclusions regarding Christian groups. Conversely, my engagement with Muslim associations initially presented challenges but ultimately proved fruitful. My previous research networks and experiences in studying Islam in West Africa were instrumental in overcoming potential barriers. This prior engagement allowed me to approach Muslim student groups and established my credibility, facilitating meaningful interactions despite initial hurdles.

The oral history interviews and ethnographic observations were crucial in reconstructing and analysing the life trajectories of religious leaders and activists. In this context, ‘life trajectory’ refers to the paths individuals take over the course of their lives, influenced by personal decisions, cultural expectations, and socio-political conditions. This approach provides insights into how personal experiences shape public roles and religious expressions within student associations. By incorporating life trajectories, this study offers a means of exploring both the historical and contemporary dynamics of student religious associations. It demonstrates how individual leaders and members have shaped and been shaped by broader social and religious movements. This approach complements my focus on organised activism by providing a bridge between individual experiences and collective action, offering an understanding of how personal faith journeys intersect with institutional religious engagement on campus.

The book also draws on a comprehensive review of articles from state press publications since 1970, including *Togo-Presse*⁷⁰ and *La Nation*,⁷¹ as well as from private newspapers⁷² and the confessional press.⁷³ This diverse range of publications offers valuable insights into the development of religious student associations, universities, and the wider social, political, and religious contexts in Benin and Togo.

A unique and innovative feature of this book is its integration with the *Islam West Africa Collection (IWAC)*,⁷⁴ an open-access digital database. Almost all the newspaper articles from Togo and Benin that relate to Islam and Muslims include a link to this collection, allowing readers an unprecedented level of direct access to the full, digitised articles of many primary sources cited here. By bridging the gap

70 Formerly *La Nouvelle Marche* between 1979 and 1991.

71 Formerly *Daho-Express* (1969–75) and *Ehuzu* (1975–90).

72 Mainly *Atopani Express*, *Forum Hebdo*, *Courrier du Golfe*, *L'éveil du Peuple*, *Le Démocrate*, *Fraternité*, *Banouto*, and *L'Événement Précis*.

73 *Islam Hebdo*, *Le Rendez-Vous*, *Le Pacifique*, and *Présence Chrétienne*.

74 <https://islam.zmo.de/s/westafrica/>.

between analysis and primary sources, this feature not only supports the book's arguments but also encourages further research and exploration of the topic.

Access to student association archives was challenging due to poor preservation of ephemeral materials such as pamphlets, resulting in incomplete records. Nevertheless, I was able to collect various documents from Islamic and Christian groups, including bulletins, magazines, and brochures.⁷⁵ To complement these sources and bridge gaps in the historical record, I also utilised the Facebook pages and websites of the religious groups in question.

The book's analysis operates at multiple scales, moving between macro-historical perspectives and micro-level ethnographic insights. This dual focus enables it to explore the interrelationship between structural forces and individual agency. It examines how political regimes, education policies, and religious institutions have created the framework within which student activism has developed, while also investigating the motivations, experiences, and actions of individual students. This approach reveals how students navigate, challenge, and sometimes transform these structures through their religious engagement. Furthermore, I consider the translocal dimensions⁷⁶ of these student movements, recognising how student groups have established connections across West Africa, transcending national boundaries. This perspective allows us to understand how ideas, practices, and experiences are exchanged and adapted across different contexts, highlighting the interconnected nature of faith-based student activism in the region.

By combining these diverse sources and analytical approaches, this study offers a comprehensive account of faith-based student activism in Benin and Togo. The methodology not only captures the historical development and institutional dynamics of these associations, but also illuminates the personal experiences and broader societal impacts of religious engagement on university campuses.

Organised Religious Activism

The focus on organised activism within Christian and Islamic student associations as a lens to study religion on campus requires justification, given that such activism represents only one aspect of religious expression. Contemporary scholarship, particularly the 'lived religion'⁷⁷ or 'lived Islam'⁷⁸ approaches, emphasises the

⁷⁵ ASSALAM, *Le Cor de la JEC-Togo*, and *Le Nouveau Repère*.

⁷⁶ Freitag and von Oppen 2010.

⁷⁷ Hall 1997; McGuire 2008; Osella and Soares 2020.

⁷⁸ Larsen 2021.

importance of exploring the religious practices and identities of ‘ordinary’ believers to understand the complexities of ‘everyday religiosity’. Janson advocates a shift towards ‘more on the ways in which religious practitioners actually “live” religion and how their ways of “living” religion relate to each other.’⁷⁹ This approach acknowledges that religious identity often transcends organised structures, manifesting in personal, individual forms that may not be captured by studying formal associations alone.

Similarly, current research on ethical norms and religious ideologies often overlooks the complexity of religious practice, neglecting moments of inconsistency, contradiction, and ambivalence in believers’ lives. Anthropological studies of Islam, for instance, have been critiqued for overemphasising the lives of pious, morally disciplined Muslims while neglecting those who do not adhere strictly to religious practices. Such approaches risk drawing artificial distinctions between religious activities and other aspects of life, potentially portraying Islam as an overly perfectionist ethical pursuit and oversimplifying the diversity and complexity inherent in the everyday experiences of Muslims.⁸⁰

While these perspectives offer valuable insights into contemporary religious experiences, this book prioritises the examination of structured, collective action within campus religious associations over a five-decade period. This focus on organised activism does not discount the importance of individual religious experiences; rather, it provides a coherent framework for analysing the historical evolution of religious engagement on university campuses. The challenges of reconstructing individual religious practices and experiences from decades past, particularly without extensive contemporaneous ethnographic data, necessitate a focus on more readily documented forms of religious engagement. By examining organised religious activism, we can trace the evolution of these associations in response to broader societal changes and institutional pressures, situating campus religious life within larger historical narratives of political change, educational reform, and religious transformation in West Africa. This approach offers a window into how students have navigated their faith identities within the constraints and opportunities of university environments over time.

Moreover, student organisations serve as important platforms for Christian and Muslim students to establish their presence and increase their visibility on campus. Their statements on various issues often garner media coverage, making them a valuable lens through which to examine religious dynamics and the diverse groups they encompass. In this context, the terms ‘association’ and ‘organisation’

⁷⁹ Janson 2020, 420.

⁸⁰ Schielke 2010; Dağyeli, Freitag and Ghrawi 2021.

refer to formal, bureaucratic forms of collaboration. These include legally constituted associations with established statutes, elected officials, and formal registration with authorities, as well as informal or unrecognised groups that incorporate bureaucratic features in their organisation and functioning. These groups typically feature designated roles such as president, secretary, and treasurer, along with bureaucratic elements like membership cards, registers, financial records, and structured systems of organisation, values, relationships, and categorisation.⁸¹ By focusing on these organised forms of religious expression, we can better understand the institutional and social structures that have shaped religious life on West African campuses over the past half century.

It is important to note that campus life at the universities of Abomey-Calavi and Lomé is characterised by a diverse array of student associations. These extend beyond religious groups to include traditional student unions, study circles, language clubs, sports teams, alumni groups from secondary schools or colleges, and various prayer groups. Particularly noteworthy are associations formed by students from specific localities or from abroad, encompassing both diaspora and international students. Interestingly, on both campuses, student activism related to regional origin is more pronounced among students from the North than those from the South. These regional associations primarily focus on promoting student integration and fostering solidarity among peers from similar geographical backgrounds, rather than advocating corporatist demands. They engage in cultural activities and play a crucial role in organising transport for students to different regions during holidays. Collectively, these various associations provide essential support for students, helping them navigate both academic and everyday challenges.

This book explores the roles and motivations of individuals actively involved in faith-based student associations. In French-speaking contexts, such involvement is often referred to as being a *'militant'* for a particular organisation and engaging in *'militantisme.'* However, translating these terms into English presents challenges, as *'militant'* often connotes aggressive or violent activism, typically associated with confrontational stances in political or social contexts. This connotation does not align with the French concept of *'militantisme'* in faith-based student associations, which encompasses a wider range of activities. To address this, I use *'activist'* and *'activism'* as more appropriate translations, better capturing the essence of active and committed participation within these religious associations. It is important to note that the distinction between activists and sympathisers is not always clear-

81 Carbonnel, Diallo and Doumbia 2021.

cut, with some associations using paid memberships or dues as a metric for active involvement, though this does not always reflect the true nature of participation.

In the context of this study, religious activism is understood as collective actions and social mobilisation aimed at asserting religious perspectives within public spaces, particularly the university environment. This form of activism often involves organising religious events, participating in community service, and advocating for the interests and values of the religious community. While distinct from proselytising, which primarily aims to spread religious beliefs among non-adherents, religious activism can overlap with it. As observed in these student associations, religious activism frequently transcends mere advocacy for religious beliefs, often seeking to transform society according to those beliefs, merging religious advocacy with attempts to influence broader societal norms and values.

The typology of actors involved in these associations reveals several categories. These include activists deeply involved in the association's activities and decision-making processes; supporters and sympathisers, who embrace the ideals and values of an association without formally joining or participating regularly; unaffiliated active religious participants, who remain observant but neither fully embrace nor publicly reject any specific association's ideals; alumni of religious associations, who may continue to influence or support the group; institutional university actors, such as faculty or staff, who interact with or influence these associations; and those responsible for places of worship near campuses, including religious leaders, who may have a significant impact on student religious life.

The diversity within this associative field reflects the complex nature of religious engagement on campus. Despite the significance of spirituality in people's lives, activism within religious associations may not be a priority for all students due to various personal, academic, or social factors. This framework helps us understand the landscape of religious activism on campus, distinguishing between different levels of engagement and the various roles individuals play in shaping the religious and social dynamics of university life. It also sets the stage for examining how these forms of activism interact with broader societal issues and university policies, providing a comprehensive view of the impact and evolution of faith-based student associations in Benin and Togo.

While this book primarily focuses on Christian and Muslim student associations, it is crucial to situate these groups within the broader religious landscape of Benin and Togo. Endogenous religions, particularly Vodun, continue to exert significant cultural influence despite a decline in formal adherence since independence. Although many in the middle and upper classes, including a large proportion of university students, have converted to Christianity or Islam, a considerable number still seek guidance from Vodun diviners and priests. Ancestor worship and other

traditional beliefs remain particularly influential in rural communities.⁸² The relationship between established faiths and indigenous practices is complex and often ambivalent. Many African Pentecostal churches, for instance, simultaneously draw on and reject indigenous practices,⁸³ often engaging in spiritual warfare against what they perceive as demonic aspects of traditional culture.⁸⁴

On university campuses, endogenous religions manifest in various ways, from academic discourse on cultural heritage to subtle influences on student worldviews. While Christian and Muslim associations focus primarily on their respective faiths, they inevitably engage with questions of cultural identity and traditional spirituality in their activities and discussions. The emphasis on Christian and Islamic movements in this study reflects their historical prominence in organised campus associations. Only recently have practitioners of endogenous religions begun to assert themselves more visibly in academic settings, a development explored in Chapter 7. While an in-depth study of how Christian and Muslim students incorporate elements of traditional religions into their individual practices would undoubtedly be enlightening, such an exploration lies beyond the scope of this book. Instead, this work focuses on the organised manifestations of religious life on campus and their broader impact on higher education in West Africa.

1.6 Structure of the Book

This book is structured into seven chapters. Following the introduction, Chapter 2 examines the emergence of military regimes in Togo and Benin during the 1970s and 1980s. This era, characterised by authoritarian rule and stringent regulation of religious activity, provides the context for the establishment of the University of Dahomey in Abomey-Calavi and the University of Benin in Lomé in 1970. These institutions were envisioned as catalysts for nation-building, decolonisation, and national independence, aimed at combating intellectual, cultural, and economic underdevelopment. Both Eyadéma in Togo and Kérékou in Benin sought to control student movements on their respective campuses, suppressing open opposition and aligning student activism with ruling party ideologies. While Eyadéma's efforts largely succeeded in Togo, Kérékou's regime faced persistent resistance, particularly on the Abomey-Calavi campus, which became a notable epicentre of opposition.

⁸² Falen 2018; Landry 2018; Montgomery 2020; Vannier 2020.

⁸³ Wariboko 2017.

⁸⁴ Meyer 1998.

The third chapter analyses the origins and early development of faith-based student associations on both campuses against the backdrop of political turbulence in the 1970s and 1980s. It explores the interplay between local initiatives and global religious movements, illustrating how these associations forged distinct identities under authoritarian regimes. Pioneering this movement were the GBUST and the GBEEB, both drawing inspiration from the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES). The JEC also emerged during this period, with varying degrees of success; while it avoided dissolution in Togo, its Beninese counterpart faced tighter restrictions, strategically relocating to more lenient northern dioceses. Concurrently, the Muslim student community underwent significant developments, leading to the formation of the *Communauté Islamique Universitaire du Bénin* (University Islamic Community of Benin, CIUB) and later the *Jeunesse Estudiantine Islamique de l'Université du Bénin* (Islamic Student Youth of the University of Benin, JEIUB). These groups were bolstered by strengthening ties with the Arab-Muslim world, particularly Libya. Despite the constraints of authoritarian rule, these associations not only persisted but also carved out intellectual and spiritual spaces for students, skilfully balancing strategic adaptation with negotiation.

The fourth chapter examines the 1990s, a pivotal decade characterised by socio-political liberalisation and a resurgence of religious fervour in both Benin and Togo. This era created an environment conducive to the flourishing of religious student organisations on campus, exemplified by the construction of a chapel and a mosque at the University of Lomé. With official recognition, faith-based student associations experienced a surge in membership and diversified their activities. Simultaneously, campuses grappled with the escalating challenges of rampant overcrowding and declining educational funding, which significantly impacted students' living conditions. In this increasingly tense environment, religious organisations stepped in to provide not only spiritual guidance but also practical support. Their efforts extended beyond religious education to life skills training through mediation, tutoring, and community service initiatives. Of particular note was the experience of Muslim student groups in navigating the complexities of practising their faith in a predominantly Christian campus environment.

Chapter five looks at the evolution of faith-based student activism in Benin and Togo during the 2000s and early 2010s, a period often regarded as the 'golden age' of these movements. Christian and Islamic student associations demonstrated remarkable adaptability to the changing socio-economic landscape by organising workshops, conferences, and roundtable discussions with a strong emphasis on entrepreneurship and skills development. This shift in focus responded to a growing awareness that academic qualifications alone were no longer sufficient to ensure success in the contemporary labour market. The chapter provides a detailed analysis of these faith-based groups' activities, highlighting their emphasis on develop-

ing leadership and entrepreneurial skills among their members. It also examines how these groups sought to strike a balance between civic engagement and political neutrality, focusing on empowering members to take on broader socio-economic roles while generally avoiding direct political involvement.

The sixth chapter investigates the post-university trajectories of former Christian and Islamic student association activists. It examines how the skills and experiences acquired during their university years have shaped their engagement in broader social, political, and religious spheres. The chapter analyses the role of alumni networks such as the *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes* (Network of former *Jécistes*, RAJEC), the *Amicale des Intellectuels Musulmans du Bénin* (Association of Muslim Intellectuals of Benin, AIMB), and the *Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo* (Association of Muslim Cadres in Togo, ACMT) in facilitating continued faith-based engagement with societal issues. It contrasts the socio-political engagement of Christian and Islamic groups, noting that while many former JEC members have attained prominent social positions, their actions often align with their Bishops' Conferences rather than representing independent stances. Conversely, former Islamic group members have contributed more significantly to developing an Islamic press and initiatives aimed at unifying the Muslim community. The chapter also highlights the challenges faced by AIMB and ACMT in reforming Muslim umbrella organisations, particularly due to longstanding leadership ties to the state that complicate community-centred representation.

The final chapter serves as an epilogue, examining the prevailing narrative of declining activism in faith-based student organisations at the UL and UAC. It critically assesses claims of dwindling participation in both Christian and Islamic campus groups, often attributed by former members to a perceived decline in current students' maturity, commitment, and religious values. The chapter reveals a complex reality shaped by various internal and external factors. It explores how university transformations, including increased enrolments and student dispersion in urban areas, have impacted these associations. The chapter also considers the growing competition from neighbourhood religious groups and the financial pressures faced by students. Notably, it examines the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in accelerating a shift towards digital engagement, fundamentally altering traditional participation methods. The stricter enforcement of *laïcité*, particularly in Benin, is highlighted as a significant challenge for these groups in securing spaces for their activities. While acknowledging elements suggesting a decline in traditional forms of activism, the chapter argues that the situation more accurately reflects an adaptation of student activism to evolving university dynamics and broader societal changes, including the transformative impact of social media on organisational strategies and message dissemination.

2 The Advent of Military Regimes and the Creation of the First Public University in Togo and Benin (1970–80)

The second chapter examines the decades of the 1970s and 1980s in Togo and Benin, a period marked by the emergence of military regimes and the creation of the first public universities. It examines how these political contexts, characterised by authoritarian leadership, interacted with the educational environment. It analyses the political landscapes shaped by the authoritarian rules of Presidents Mathieu Kérékou in Benin and Gnassingbé Eyadéma in Togo, who sought to bolster their legitimacy by courting influential Christian and Muslim leaders despite their repressive policies and strict regulation of religious activity. Kérékou's commitment to Marxism-Leninism and Eyadéma's philosophy of 'authenticity' are also examined.

The chapter also traces the founding of the University of Dahomey in Abomey-Calavi and the University of Benin in Lomé in 1970. These institutions were not merely educational enterprises, but political projects designed to promote nation-building, decolonisation, and national independence. Despite their aim to combat intellectual, cultural, and economic underdevelopment, these universities reflected the educational models of their former colonial power, France, whose financial, material, and human support was crucial to the creation of these institutions and to their development in the early years.

Finally, the chapter addresses the regimes' strategies to suppress student protests as part of their broader efforts to consolidate power. The dissolution of student unions and the co-optation of student leaders and academic staff were tactics employed to stifle dissent. However, in Benin, the state struggled to silence the persistent protests on the Abomey-Calavi campus, which saw numerous demonstrations against Kérékou's regime, unlike the relatively quieter campus in Togo.

2.1 One-Party States and Military Rule: The Regimes of Eyadéma and Kérékou

This section examines the Eyadéma and Kérékou regimes, analysing how military rule and one-party states shaped the political and social terrain of Togo and Benin in the 1970s and 1980s. President Eyadéma came to power in 1967 and established a relatively stable military dictatorship throughout the 1970s and 1980s. His rule was characterised by a strong cult of personality and the strategic co-optation of

Christian and Muslim leaders through patronage. In Dahomey, the revolutionary regime established after Colonel Kérékou's coup d'état in October 1972 marked a decisive change in the political landscape there. It ushered in a period of relative stability, lasting until the late 1980s, in stark contrast to the prior era of high political volatility, which had earned Dahomey the nickname 'Africa's sick child' (*Enfant malade de l'Afrique*).

Consolidation of Eyadéma's Power and Patronage of Religious Leaders

Post-independence, the Ewe-speaking elite in Togo, led by President Sylvanus Olympio (1960–63), took over administrative roles formerly held by the French. Olympio's regime, initially championing pan-African and pluralist ideals, gradually became authoritarian. The Ewe elite, benefiting from higher literacy rates and control over key economic resources, were overrepresented in government and administration. Conversely, during the French colonial period, northern ethnic groups, particularly the Kabye and Kotokoli, made up over 80% of the armed forces.¹

On 13 January 1963, demobilised non-commissioned officers, including Étienne Eyadéma and Emmanuel Bodjollé, orchestrated the first coup d'état in West Africa, leading to President Olympio's assassination.² Four years later, the army intervened again to depose President Nicolas Grunitzky (1963–67). Eyadéma, who then seized power, claimed he had 'saved' Togo from an ethnically imbalanced government dominated by the southern Ewe and Mina. In April 1967, Eyadéma broke his promise to hold early elections, banning all political parties and consolidating executive power. By November 1969, he had founded the *Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais* (RPT, Rally of the Togolese People) following his '*Appel historique de Kpalimé*' ('Historic call of Kpalimé') in August.

The RPT, as the sole political party until 1991, facilitated Eyadéma's establishment of a patrimonial and dictatorial state. His regime was characterised by corruption, nepotism, and the dominance of senior military officials and the Kabye, his northern ethnic group.³ This fostered both a north-south and an ethnic divide between the Kabye and the Ewe.⁴ The media – Radio Lomé, the newspaper *Togo-Presse*, and the *Télévision togolaise* (TVT) – functioned as propaganda tools for the

1 Kothor and Lawrance 2023.

2 For a historical analysis of what was West Africa's first coup, see Skinner 2020.

3 Osei 2018, 1465–67.

4 Toulabor 1999.

party-state.⁵ Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, numerous conspiracies, assassination plots, and staged coups were employed to consolidate Eyadéma's power.⁶ The Togolese resorted to political satire to critique the regime's excesses.⁷

The international community played a crucial role in supporting Eyadéma's rule through financial aid. Despite its small size, Togo held strategic importance during the 1970s and 1980s. Surrounded by socialist-Marxist regimes leaning towards Soviet alliances – Benin to the east, Burkina Faso to the north, and Ghana to the west – Togo stood as the only pro-Western country in the region. In the early 1980s, Togo's position on the United Nations Security Council allowed it to wield significant influence in the Cold War. In addition, France, driven by economic and historical ties from its half-century of colonial rule, maintained substantial financial and emotional investments in Togo.⁸ It was this flow of money that earned Togo the nickname 'Little Switzerland'⁹ of West Africa.

Drawing inspiration from Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire and Kim Il-sung of North Korea, Eyadéma established a grand cult of personality. This involved orchestrated performances, giant photos of the 'Guide of the Nation,' loincloths adorned with the portrait of the 'National Helmsman' (*Timonier national*), hymns, and the erection of an imposing statue of the 'President-Founder' in Lomé.¹⁰ The regime's official mythology grew even more elaborate after Eyadéma survived a plane crash in Sarakawa on 24 January 1974, which was depicted as an 'imperialist attack' against him.¹¹ A mausoleum at the crash site became a major pilgrimage destination, enhancing the myth of the president's invincibility and supposed divine and mystical powers.¹²

Further emulating Mobutu, Eyadéma introduced a cultural policy of 'authenticity' in 1974, altering the spelling of place names and encouraging Togolese to abandon their Christian names in favour of traditional ones. Eyadéma himself set the example by replacing Étienne with Gnassingbé.¹³ Concepts of 'revolution', 'anti-imperialism', and 'authenticity' dominated the political discourse of the time. The end of the *régime d'exception* in 1979, marked by the election of the first

5 Douti, Sossou, and Tsigbé 2021, 76–77; Rambaud 2006.

6 Toulabor 1986; Piot 2010, 21–34.

7 Toulabor 2008.

8 Piot 2010, 28–29.

9 Dash, 'Togo's Ruler Aims...', *The Washington Post*, 15 June 1980.

10 Piot 2010, 21–51.

11 'Le peuple togolais...', *Togo-Presse*, 8 February 1974.

12 Macé 2004, 863–64.

13 Bassah, 'Culture et authenticité...', *Togo-Presse*, 18 April 1979.

National Assembly since 1967 – still under single-party rule – and the establishment of the Third Republic in 1980 indicated a relative softening of the regime.

Eyadéma's strategy for regulating the religious sphere relied on building loyalties to keep religious leaders out of politics. Leaders of all denominations were co-opted through favours and personal relationships to legitimise and sanctify Eyadéma's power. Major regime commemorations typically included a Catholic mass, a Protestant service, and a Muslim prayer at the Maison du RPT. Prominent religious figures such as imams from the *Union Musulmane du Togo* (Muslim Union of Togo, UMT), bishops like Msgr Robert-Casimir Dosseh-Anyron,¹⁴ and Protestant pastors including Ayi Houenou Joachim Hunlédé¹⁵, often competed to display their loyalty. For instance, during Togo's 18th independence anniversary, Imam Alassani Anem urged reflection on divine leadership, asserting that God chooses leaders like President Eyadéma, whose survival in the Sarakawa plane crash was seen as divine intervention.¹⁶ This phenomenon, termed 'eyadémistic ecumenism' (*'œcuménisme eyadémistique'*) by Toulabor, describes 'a discursive space of competition between the officials of the country's various religious denominations (bishop, pastor, imam, Vodun priest), among whom the government skilfully stirred up underhand rivalries in a spiral of support and praise for the head of state'.¹⁷

Religious leaders who opposed the regime faced severe repression. In October 1974, Eyadéma met with a delegation of Togolese clergy led by the Archbishop of Lomé, who apologised for a priest's sermon opposing the government's authenticity policy.¹⁸ Similarly, in 1975, the Bishop Bernard Oguki-Atakpah of Atkapamé faced the regime's wrath for criticising Eyadéma and the RPT in a sermon.¹⁹ Despite tensions with the Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II visited Togo in August 1985.²⁰

Beyond personal relationships, Eyadéma's regime enforced strict religious regulation. In May 1978, the National Council of the RPT, 'considering that the proliferation of religious sects is likely to seriously disturb public peace and order' and that 'the security of the State could be threatened by the conscious or unconscious use of the followers of these sects,' banned around twenty religious organisations.

14 Toulabor 1989.

15 First Minister of Foreign Affairs under Eyadéma (1967–76), he retired from political life in 1976 to become a pastor. He was appointed head of the Église Évangélique du Togo in 1977. See 'M. Hunlédé est consacré...', *Togo-Presse*, 16 August 1977.

16 'Célébration de nos 18 ans...', *Togo-Presse*, 28 April 1978.

17 Toulabor 1993, 280.

18 'Mgr Komlan Messan Anyron...', *Togo-Presse*, 8 October 1974.

19 'Brandissant des pancartes...', *Togo-Presse*, 7 May 1975; 'Le sermon séditionnel...', *Togo-Presse*, 9 May 1975.

20 'Arrivé hier à Lomé...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 9 August 1985.

Only the Catholic, Evangelical, Methodist, Baptist, Muslim, Assemblies of God, and Adventist churches were permitted to operate.²¹ Practicing any banned sect clandestinely was punishable by imprisonment and fines.²² This law allowed Muslim Union leaders to officially ban the *Fayda Tarbiyya*.²³ Under the influence of the popular Senegalese Sufi sheikh and scholar Ibrahim Niassé, the *Tarbiyya* revival had taken root in Sokodé, one of the main centres of Islam in Togo, creating a sharp division between its supporters and critics.²⁴ As for the Protestants, the law indirectly favoured the Assemblies of God, the dominant Pentecostal denomination. Despite these restrictions, at least twenty new clandestine Pentecostal churches sprang up in the first half of the 1980s, particularly in Lomé.²⁵

The state also regularly intervened in national religious umbrella organisations. The state played a mediator role in internal divisions, particularly within the Muslim Union, to promote its political marginalisation and loyalty.²⁶ In 1976, Eyadéma dissolved the UMT executive committee due to internal disputes.²⁷ Demonstrating goodwill, in 1983, Eyadéma personally arranged the repatriation of Togolese pilgrims stranded in Jeddah by chartering the presidential plane.²⁸ In 1987, Ayité Gachin Mivedor, a powerful RPT Central Committee member in the 1970s and former Minister of Public Works and Mines, was appointed lay Vice-President of the Methodist Church of Togo (*Église Méthodiste du Togo*, EMT).²⁹

Similarly, a one-party military regime was established in Benin in 1972, officially adopting Marxist-Leninist principles, contrasting with Togo's pro-Western stance.

21 'Fin de la 2^e réunion...', *Togo-Presse*, 10 May 1978.

22 'Hier au Conseil des ministres...', *Togo-Presse*, 28 February 1979.

23 'L'Union Musulmane jette...', *Togo-Presse*, 17 July 1972; 'Avis et communiqués...', *Togo-Presse*, 15 February 1973.

24 At the heart of these debates were different interpretations of the term *tarbiyya*, traditionally understood in Sufism as spiritual training aimed at promoting a direct experience of God. This spiritual regimen often included activities such as fasting, meditation, and seclusion. See, Seesemann 2011.

25 Noret 2004, 79–81.

26 'Le président Eyadéma a reçu...', *Togo-Presse*, 11 June 1970.

27 'En raison des dissensions internes...', *Togo-Presse*, 30 July 1976.

28 'La communauté musulmane du Togo...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 18 October 1983.

29 Attiogbe-Akogni, 'Synode de l'Église Méthodiste...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 25 February 1988.

From Africa's Sick Child to a Marxist Regime in Benin

Between 1960 and 1972, Dahomey experienced a tumultuous political landscape with over a dozen leaders – six military and five civilian – assuming power. During this period, the country adopted five constitutions and witnessed twelve coups, five of which were successful. The political arena was characterised by intense rivalry among three key figures: Sourou Migan Apithy, Hubert Maga, and Justin Tométin Ahomadegbé. Their cyclical alternation in power culminated in a triumvirate between 1970 and 1972, eventually leading to Mathieu Kérékou's coup d'état. This instability, driven by ethno-regional rivalries and historical north-south divisions, had significant economic, social, and cultural repercussions, earning Dahomey the moniker 'Africa's sick child'.³⁰

On the afternoon of 26 October 1972, young officers with little political influence staged a coup d'état, ending Dahomey's political turbulence and the power monopoly of the southern Benin intellectual elite that had emerged from the colonial system. To secure northern support, they entrusted the leadership to Colonel Mathieu Kérékou, a Somba from the north. Following the coup, the military embarked on a series of reforms and voiced populist and nationalist grievances about Dahomey's subjugation and neo-dependence on the former colonial power. Initially, their ideological stance unequivocally rejected the 'external lessons' of 'socialism, communism, or capitalism'.³¹ The coup d'état ushered in a period of relative stability, which underwent significant changes due to evolving factional struggles. According to Banégas, these changes included a brief nationalist phase (1972–74), a period of regime radicalisation (1974–early 1980s), a 'Thermidorian' phase marked by a pragmatic retreat from socialism (1982–88), and ultimately a crisis that led to the regime's downfall (1989–90).³²

On 30 November 1974, at Place Goho in Abomey, President Kérékou officially adopted Marxism-Leninism as the state ideology in his '*Discours d'orientation nationale*' (National Orientation Speech). His speech, while echoing the nationalist and anti-imperialist themes of 1972, now articulated these ideas through the lens of 'scientific socialism'. The *Gouvernement Militaire Révolutionnaire* (Military Revolutionary Government, GMR) was subsequently established. In November 1975, Dahomey was renamed the People's Republic of Benin, launching an extensive project to 'revolutionise' society. This transformation included nationalising all economic sectors, reforming the education system, and establishing local revolu-

³⁰ Banégas 2003, 32–36; Sedegan and Allocheme 2021.

³¹ Decalo 1985, 125.

³² Banégas 2003, 44.

tionary committees. Concurrently, the dictatorship was institutionalised with the creation of the *Parti de la Révolution Populaire du Bénin* (People's Revolutionary Party of Benin, PRPB) in 1975, the election of a National Revolutionary Assembly, and the adoption of a new *Loi fondamentale* in 1977.³³

The revolutionary agenda included the 'fight against obscurantism' (*lutte contre l'obscurantisme*) and the eradication of 'feudal forces' (*forces féodales*). Cults and religions were perceived as retrograde forces impeding socio-economic progress. While opposing the 'imperialist agenda' of the Catholic Church and the 'obscurantist forces' of traditional religion, the regime stopped short of completely eliminating religious freedom. At a meeting with leaders of various religious leaders in November 1974, President Kérékou assured them, stating, 'We have never proclaimed that our revolution was against cults and we have never said that our revolution wants to install atheism in our country.'³⁴ However, addressing the Muslim community specifically, Kérékou criticised the practice of 'mystifying people with prayers' and imams who 'exploit their compatriots by reciting bad prayers'. He issued a stark warning: 'But if Muslims continue to hold prayers in the homes of former politicians [...] so that they can take power in this country again and serve them (we know all about that), we will demolish the mosques.'³⁵ Similarly, an article in *Ehuzu* in 1975, titled 'Our attitude to religious beliefs', emphasised that the enemies of the revolution were spreading disinformation by falsely claiming that the socialist regime was against religions. The article asserted that if 'a religion attacks our ideology under any pretext, it will be fought vigorously and objectively' because 'our socialist option marks the end of all myths and mystifications, the end of all political, economic, cultural and spiritual alienations.'³⁶

Despite ideological assurances of some religious freedoms, the regime's actions told a different story. Sacred trees were felled and vodun shrines were closed or destroyed in the fight against feudalism. Religious ceremonies faced strict regulation or severe restriction. At the height of the anti-feudal struggle, sorcery was explicitly labelled as 'supreme feudalism'. In the 1970s, when vodun remained a significant religious practice, the Marxist discourse aimed to liberate the people not only from capitalist domination but also from the 'retrograde feudal lords' through a 'nationwide, state-sponsored anti-witchcraft campaign'.³⁷

33 Decalo 1979, 237–47; Allen 1992, 64–66; Banégas 2003, 43–47.

34 'Le chef de l'État aux communautés...', *Daho-Express*, 18 November 1974.

35 Ibid.

36 'Notre attitude face...', *Daho-Express*, 13 February 1975. The *Ehuzu* newspaper published several articles on the issue of revolution and religious beliefs. See for example d'Almeida, 'Tribune libre...', *Ehuzu*, 14 January 1976.

37 Kahn 2011, 4.

The Catholic Church, a dominant religious institution since the colonial period, was compelled to comply with regulations dictating a specific calendar for religious activities and imposed spending caps on celebrations. From 1973 to 1974, religious education was secularised and nationalised, impacting the Catholic Church significantly, as it owned the most prestigious educational institutions.³⁸ Throughout the 1970s, the Catholic Church was subjected to state-led denunciation campaigns and the arrest of several priests, including the Bishop of Lokossa.³⁹ In 1975, Abbé André Quenum, an intellectual priest and director of the prestigious Père Aupiais College in Cotonou, was arrested and sentenced to death along with other political opponents, although the sentence was not carried out.⁴⁰

Like Togo, the Beninese state did not hesitate to interfere in religious affairs. The state created the *Conseil Interconfessionnel Protestant du Bénin* (Protestant Interconfessional Council of Benin, CIPB) to have a single representative for the Protestant community alongside the Catholic Church. The CIPB, which included evangelical and prophetic churches, maintained close ties with the government. Chaired by the Methodist minister Henry Harry throughout the revolutionary period, the CIPB enabled the churches to conduct a minimum of activities in Benin.⁴¹

Like Eyadéma's regime, Kérékou's government became deeply involved in managing rivalries among various Islamic groups to consolidate its authority. In 1973, President Kérékou repeatedly criticised the disarray within the Muslim community, attributing it to political machinations, vested interests, and human exploitation. This disorder was supposedly particularly evident during Ramadan and the organisation of the pilgrimage. At a meeting with Muslim leaders, Kérékou's adviser on cultural affairs asserted that 'the state is certainly secular; it is careful not to interfere in religious affairs.' However, he emphasised the need to 'end the anarchy stemming from the profusion of these [Islamic] organisations, first by ensuring their dissolution and then by creating a broad-based revolutionary Islamic movement at the national level that truly addresses the real interests of all Muslims, without exception.'⁴² Two months later, during another meeting with Muslim community leaders, Kérékou reiterated the 'effective *laïcité* that the Military Revolutionary Government has always applied', insisting that 'internal divisions and disagreements must cease' and warning that 'all those who confuse

38 Strandsbjerg 2015, 90–95.

39 Tall 1995, 197.

40 Strandsbjerg 2015, 62–63.

41 Mayrargue 2005, 253.

42 'Vers l'union de la Communauté...', *Daho-Express*, 14 August 1973.

religion with activism will be severely punished.⁴³ Despite a 1975 *Daho-Express* article suggesting that Muslims had achieved ‘Order and Unity’ with the creation of the National Islamic Directorate of Dahomey (*Direction Islamique Nationale du Dahomey*),⁴⁴ the ‘mass faith-based organisation’ known as the *Union Islamique du Bénin* (Islamic Union of Benin, UIB) was not officially established until 1984.⁴⁵

The regime entered a new phase around the turn of the 1980s, when civilian authority began to replace military control, and ideological radicalism gradually gave way to pragmatism. Facing escalating social unrest and resistance from high-ranking civil servants unwilling to join the PRPB, Kérékou opted for dialogue. In 1979, he convened a ‘cadre conference’ that brought together representatives from various administrative sectors. This softening of the regime was marked by a noticeable easing of repressive measures, including inviting exiles to return and releasing political prisoners and leaders detained during the anti-feudal campaign. The regime also allowed a limited opening of the public sphere, exemplified by authorising local development associations from 1985. Diplomatic relations improved unexpectedly, highlighted by the historic visit of French President François Mitterrand in 1983.⁴⁶

The new pragmatism of the early 1980s was evident in the regime’s relaxed control over religion. Following the proclamation of religious neutrality in the 1977 Basic Law of the People’s Republic of Benin,⁴⁷ the government permitted Pope John Paul II to visit in 1982 and resumed religious radio broadcasts.⁴⁸ From 1979, major religious groups were represented in the new Revolutionary Assembly, in which representatives were elected locally and then stood on a single national list. ‘Animists’ were allocated three seats, while Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism each received one.⁴⁹ By 1986, the Ministry of the Interior had registered over 500 applications for the recognition of churches or religious associations.⁵⁰

As Strandsbjerg has shown, the relationship between political power and religious institutions was complex. The authoritarian military regime vehemently attacked religious and traditional powers while simultaneously drawing on symbolic references to the Kingdom of Dahomey, the Vodun universe, and a wider

43 ‘Le chef de l’Etat exhorte...’, *Daho-Express*, 1 October 1973.

44 Assouma, ‘Tribune libre...’, *Daho-Express*, 17 July 1975.

45 ‘L’Union islamique ou...’, *Ehuzu*, 31 January 1984.

46 Banégas 2003, 47–63. See also, Vittin 1991; Gandonou 2010.

47 ‘Belief or non-belief in a religion is a matter for each individual, and the Revolution remains strictly neutral’ (Article 12).

48 ‘Reprise des émissions religieuses...’, *Ehuzu*, 9 July 1985.

49 Strandsbjerg 2015, 63.

50 Tall 1995, 198.

‘occult’ or mystical realm.⁵¹ By the early 1980s, Kérékou had officially engaged the Malian-born marabout Amadou Cissé as an advisor. Cissé, who had reportedly worked for presidents Mobutu Sese Seko and Omar Bongo, became a public figure, often appearing alongside the head of state at official events. By this time, Kérékou had already established significant connections with Vodun cult leaders.⁵²

Ultimately, the radical phase of the Beninese revolution was short-lived. The popular term *‘laxisme-béninisme’* (‘Laxism-Beninism’) encapsulates the ideological inconsistencies of Kérékou’s regime, its failure to impose a revolutionary project on a resistant society, and its eventual descent into corruption and bankruptcy.⁵³ Despite the highly personalised nature of governance, the revolutionary period did not witness the emergence of a personality cult around Kérékou, unlike the situation in Togo. Contrary to some perceptions, Kérékou’s regime was not ethnically biased or ‘northern-centric’. Unlike Eyadéma’s army, which was predominantly composed of members of the Kabye ethnic group, Kérékou’s military was not an exclusive praetorian guard of his Somba ethnic group. He skilfully incorporated representatives from various regions into his circles of power.⁵⁴

While both Eyadéma and Kérékou sought to bolster their legitimacy by courting influential Christian and Muslim leaders, their approaches reflected their distinct ideological orientations. Eyadéma’s strategy, rooted in his philosophy of ‘authenticity’, focused on building personal relationships and loyalties to keep religious leaders out of politics. He mobilised religious figures through favours and personal ties to legitimise and sanctify his power, while severely repressing dissenters. In contrast, Kérékou’s commitment to Marxism-Leninism led to a more confrontational stance towards religion, initially restricting religious activities and targeting traditional religions and Catholic institutions as retrogressive forces. Despite this, he maintained a degree of pragmatism, particularly in the later stages of his rule, allowing some religious activities and easing restrictions. However, both leaders strategically interfered in religious affairs to establish their authority. Eyadéma played rival Islamic groups against each other, while Kérékou criticised disorder within the Muslim community. Ultimately, despite their differing ideological foundations, Eyadéma and Kérékou employed similar tactics of patronage, repression, and interference to consolidate power and regulate the religious sphere in their respective countries. It was against this backdrop of political authoritarianism, ideological manoeuvring, and religious regulation that the University of Dahomey in

51 Strandsbjerg 2015, 77.

52 Ibid., 103–09.

53 Banégas 2003, 52.

54 Ibid., 62.

Abomey-Calavi and the University of Benin in Lomé, both founded in 1970, developed during the 1970s and 1980s.

2.2 The Birth of Higher Education in Benin and Togo

Before the establishment of the first public universities in Togo and Benin, students from both countries had to attend the University of Dakar, the University of Abidjan, or universities in France to pursue higher education. Although plans for national universities emerged in the early 1960s, the projects did not materialise until 1970, encouraged by the expulsion of Beninese and Togolese students from the University of Dakar in 1968 and facilitated by support from international partners, particularly France. The creation of these institutions aimed not only to train administrative cadres for the newly independent countries but also to serve as national projects linked to decolonisation.

Colonial Education in French West Africa

In French West Africa (AOF), colonial education primarily aimed to train auxiliaries for the colonisers, with little focus on developing local higher education.⁵⁵ Besides primary education, a number of vocational schools were established, including the William Ponty School, the Rufisque School, notably the Dakar Medical School (1916), the Institut Pasteur de l'AOF (1924), and the Institut français d'Afrique Noire (IFAN, 1936). These institutions represented the initial steps towards higher education in AOF.⁵⁶ Compared to British colonies, the development of higher education in French West Africa came relatively late. For instance, the Achimota School in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) was founded in 1927,⁵⁷ and the University of Ibadan in Nigeria in 1948.⁵⁸

In French West Africa, serious discussions about a higher education system began only after the Brazzaville Conference in 1944. That year, an IFAN centre was opened in Dahomey, focusing on humanities research. Located in Porto-Novo, it was affiliated with the Museum of the Ancient Palaces of the Kings of Dahomey in

⁵⁵ Jézéquel 2007.

⁵⁶ Gamble 2017; Singaravélou 2009.

⁵⁷ Yamada 2009.

⁵⁸ Livsey 2017.

Abomey and the Museum of Ouidah.⁵⁹ Following the unanimous approval of the Grand Council of the AOF, the Institut des Hautes Études de Dakar (IHED) was established by decree on 6 April 1950. In February 1957, the IHED evolved into the University of Dakar, becoming both the 18th French university and the first African university in the AOF region, setting a precedent for higher education in francophone Africa.⁶⁰ In Dahomey, known as the ‘Latin Quarter of Africa’, education played a significant role during the colonial period. Consequently, it was unsurprising that, from the early 1960s, the political elite of the newly independent country aspired to create a national university.

From the *Institut d’Enseignement Supérieur du Bénin* (IESB) to the Establishment of National Universities in 1970

French colonial rule profoundly reshaped Dahomey’s elite structure, dismantling the monarchy and fostering a new dominant class known as the *Akowé*, or ‘educated elite’ (*évolués*). The advent of direct French rule in 1900 created an urgent need for local intermediaries in the colonial administration, elevating educational qualifications above traditional social or communal origins as the primary determinant of power. This new elite, predominantly born between 1910 and 1920 and largely products of Catholic education in the southern regions, fully emerged in the aftermath of World War II. They adeptly leveraged the institutional reforms of the 1940s and 1950s to assert their political influence, soon dominating ‘press societies’, public administration, parastatals, legislative assemblies, governments, and party hierarchies.⁶¹ Their influence extended beyond Dahomey’s borders, with many *Akowé* serving in administrative roles throughout AOF.⁶²

As in many African nations, the early 1960s saw Dahomey’s national elite envisioning the university as a potent symbol of post-colonial emancipation and national identity. This institution was expected to revolutionise the educational system, transforming it from an imposed, metropolitan-modelled structure into one that could train a new African elite, particularly a bureaucratic cadre capable of replacing departing colonial administrators.⁶³ Hubert Maga, the first president of independent Dahomey (1960–63), championed the creation of a national univer-

⁵⁹ Hounzandji 2021, 47.

⁶⁰ Capelle 1990; Baldé 2023.

⁶¹ Banégas 2003, 38–43; Ronen 1974.

⁶² Capelle 1990, 18–20.

⁶³ Provini, Mayrargue, and Chitou 2020, 3.

sity. However, this ambitious project faced significant hurdles: political instability impeded progress, while France, having made substantial investments in the Universities of Dakar (1957) and Abidjan (1959), was hesitant to fund yet another national university in West Africa.

Despite these challenges, Dahomey signed its first higher education cooperation agreement with France on 24 April 1961. Under this agreement, France committed to providing Dahomey with technical and financial assistance to train senior scientific, educational, technical, and administrative staff. Scholarships were awarded to young Dahomeans to pursue higher education at French institutions. In November 1962, a *'propédeutique de lettres'* – an intermediate course between *terminale* and bachelor's years in the French system – was established in Porto-Novo as the *Centre d'Enseignement Supérieur* (CES). The CES prepared students for admission to French higher education institutions.

The development of higher education in Dahomey and Togo took a significant step forward with the creation of the *Institut d'Enseignement Supérieur du Bénin* (IESB). A tripartite agreement between Dahomey, Togo, and France, signed on 14 July 1965, established a joint higher education structure. This agreement divided disciplines between the two countries: scientific studies were based at the Lycée Béhanzin in Porto-Novo, and literary studies at the Lycée de Tokoin in Lomé. The institutions offered the *Diplôme Universitaire d'Etudes Littéraires* (DUEL) and the *Diplôme Universitaire d'Etudes Scientifiques* (DUES), with the second phase of studies continuing at French universities.

Between May 1968 and October 1970, several events brought the national university project back onto the political agenda in Dahomey. The crisis at the University of Dakar in May 1968⁶⁴ led to the mass expulsion of foreign students, including more than 400 from Dahomey. These students were sent home in the middle of the academic year with no prospects for continuing their studies. The Dahomean student movement, led by the *Union Générale des Étudiants et Élèves du Dahomey* (General Union of Students and Pupils of Dahomey, UGEED), became more radical in May 1969 – the 'Dahomean May'⁶⁵ – demanding the creation of a national university. UGEED organised a movement of students and schoolchildren to persuade political decision-makers.

In response to the escalating social crisis, the Dahomean government intensified its contacts with potential international partners, including France, UNESCO, the United States, Canada, and Israel. Dahomey's Minister of Education, Culture, Youth, and Sport, Edmond Dossou-Yovo, emphasised in a May 1970 interview with

⁶⁴ Blum 2012; Gueye 2017; Bianchini 2019.

⁶⁵ Hounzandji 2016.

the *Daho-Express* that constructing a national university would ‘stop the exodus of our students and stem the brain drain, saving time and money’ and that Dahomey would ‘have cadres who are better adapted to the realities of the country.’⁶⁶ These efforts culminated in a tripartite meeting between France, Dahomey, and Togo in Paris on 9 July 1970, which led to the dissolution of the IESB and the creation of national universities in Togo and Dahomey.⁶⁷

The presidential decree of 21 August 1970, ‘establishing and organising higher education in Dahomey’, formalised the creation of the University of Dahomey. A week later, Professor Édouard Joshua Adjanooun, who had been working at the University of Abidjan, was appointed the first rector of the national university.⁶⁸ Minister Dossou-Yovo stressed that ‘for us, the creation of a Dahomeyan University is not an institution of prestige, but an irreplaceable national imperative, a priority for which we are prepared to make many sacrifices.’⁶⁹

In September 1970, a Franco-Dahomean commission met to decide on the university’s location, a matter of significant national debate. Some advocated for Porto-Novo, the political capital and provisional site of the university. There were also plans to build the campus in Ouando, a town less than ten kilometres northeast of the capital. Others argued that Cotonou, the economic capital and largest city of Dahomey, would be ideal. Another proposal favoured Abomey-Calavi, 18 kilometres north of Cotonou, where a large plot of land was available for the campus, which would have been difficult to find in Cotonou. Some also supported Ouidah, a city with a strong historical significance.⁷⁰ Ultimately, the choice of the Abomey-Calavi plateau was made as a response to the concern of politicians to keep student protests away from Cotonou.⁷¹

The university opened its doors on 26 October 1970 in Porto-Novo, at the site of the Lycée Béhanzin, serving as a provisional location before its definitive transfer to Abomey-Calavi. The laying of the foundation stone for the University of Dahomey in Abomey-Calavi on 6 November 1970 raised great expectations. In his speech, President Maga compared the event to the historic proclamation of national independence:

66 ‘Priorité à l’université...’, *Daho-Express*, 16 May 1970.

67 ‘Signature à Paris...’, *Daho-Express*, 11 July 1970.

68 ‘Création de l’Université dahoméenne...’, *Daho-Express*, 27 August 1970.

69 ‘Université dahoméenne...’, *Daho-Express*, 13 August 1970.

70 ‘Université: pourquoi les...’, *Daho-Express*, 26 September 1970; ‘Université: le choix...’, *Daho-Express*, 29 September 1970.

71 Université d’Abomey-Calavi 2016, 105.

Situated at the heart of the Gulf of Benin, Dahomey, through its university, will serve as a link and crossroads between the large Anglophone states of Nigeria and Ghana and the Francophone states of West Africa. The development of the University will be progressive, in accordance with the real and priority needs of the nation. [...] It will be the first factor in changing the backward mentality that hinders development. [...] Our university must not produce intellectuals who abdicate their essential responsibilities. This will only be possible if it is not a transplanted university. It must be rooted in African soil so that it can flourish within African traditions and culture. [...] Thanks to the cadres who will have the opportunity to be trained through specialised courses, our economic development will accelerate and, as a result, our cadres will have enough jobs. [...] Thanks to our university, the large number of our cadres should no longer be a curse but a blessing. We were threatened by quality; from now on we will win by the quantity and quality of our people. [...] Our university will be a hotbed of intellectual influence, a testimony to an original civilisation and to the modernity that drives us forward.⁷²

Less than a month after the ceremony, Rector Adjanooun faced a complex situation. The management of the first intake of students was complicated by the expulsion of 142 Dahomean students – along with Togolese, Malian, Voltaic, and Nigerien students⁷³ – from the University of Abidjan and their repatriation to Dahomey in November 1970. The repatriation was triggered by protests in support of Sékou Touré's Guinea.⁷⁴ Another major challenge was the limited number of Dahomean professors available for recruitment. Few were willing to leave their positions as 'French civil servants' in Dakar, Abidjan, Brazzaville, or France to join the uncertain venture of a new university.⁷⁵

Although the plan for a national university was seen as an emancipatory project, the National University of Dahomey relied heavily on France to meet the financial needs of its newly created university.⁷⁶ Initially, the teaching staff comprised Dahomeans and French aid workers. The first seven Dahomean lecturers were recruited in 1970. A year later, this number increased with the recruitment of Dahomeans already working in higher education abroad and within the national territory. Senior members of the public administration and experienced secondary school teachers were also co-opted to work at the University.⁷⁷

On 8 December 1973, the University of Dahomey began its first official academic year, presided over by President Kérékou. On 30 November 1975, the University of

⁷² 'Pose de la première pierre...', *Daho-Express*, 7 November 1970.

⁷³ 'Le Bureau Politique réaffirme...', *Fraternité Matin*, 27 November 1970.

⁷⁴ 'Nos étudiants expulsés...', *Daho-Express*, 27 November 1970; 'Les étudiants dahoméens...', *Daho-Express*, 28 November 1970.

⁷⁵ Hounzandji 2021, 188.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁷⁷ Université d'Abomey-Calavi 2016, 117.

Dahomey was renamed the National University of Benin (*Université Nationale du Bénin*, UNB) to avoid confusion with the University of Benin in Lomé. During the revolutionary period, the UNB benefited from cooperation with North Korea in the 1970s and, in 1980, the Kim Il-sung Maréchal Pavilion, a 150-bed student hostel, was inaugurated on the campus.⁷⁸



Fig. 5: The 'Marshal KIM IL SUNG Pavilion'. The fruit of Benin-Korea cooperation.⁷⁹

Dahomey's decision to create the National University of Dahomey and dissolve the joint IESB prompted the Togolese government to establish its own national university.⁸⁰ The University of Benin (UB) in Lomé was announced by presidential decree on 14 September 1970. Initially, it comprised four schools: the School of Law and Economics, the School of Science, the School of Arts, and the University Institute of Technology. By 1974, it had expanded to ten schools.⁸¹ At first, the various schools operated in classrooms borrowed from the Lycée de Tokoin, using hastily converted buildings. This temporary arrangement continued until 29 November 1973, when the University of Benin was officially inaugurated at its current site, about

⁷⁸ Bibilary, 'Inauguration officielle du...', *Ehuzu*, 21 March 1980.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ 'Une mission française à Lomé...', *Togo-Presse*, 30 January 1970.

⁸¹ Aléza 2021, 36.

2 km north of the centre of Lomé. Student enrolment increased from 845 in 1970–71 to 2,180 in 1975.⁸²

Regarding the teaching staff, the university started with about twenty professors and expected around forty new teachers for the 1971–72 academic year. Most of these educators came from France and other countries such as Canada, West Germany, the United Kingdom, and Israel. The teaching staff increased from 128 in 1972–73 to 156 at the start of the academic year in October 1973.⁸³ As in Dahomey, French support was crucial for the development of UB. A joint Franco-Togolese commission on higher and secondary education met twice a year to review French aid to Togo. France's support for the University of Benin included buildings and equipment, subsidies to the operating budget, teaching staff, and scholarships for Togolese students.⁸⁴ Additionally, the university received support from West Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, and UNESCO.⁸⁵

In May 1971, at a conference titled 'Why a national university?', Marcel Fritz Voulé, technical advisor to the Minister of National Education and Director of the Department of Educational Planning, outlined the reasons for creating a national university in Togo. He argued that the establishment of a university was essential for sovereignty and political and economic imperatives. Voulé, who had been involved in the negotiations leading to the creation of the university since November 1966, described the project as ambitious yet necessary. He asserted that every sovereign and independent state must have its own university and *grandes écoles* to train its cadres. Without these institutions, a nation would struggle to develop its culture, train its cadres according to its economic realities, and meet societal needs.⁸⁶

In November 1973, an article in *Togo-Presse* titled 'The University of Benin: essential enterprise for our development' highlighted the significance of UB's inauguration.⁸⁷ In his speech at the event, President Eyadéma emphasised that the primary task of the institution was to train cadres in line with the country's development plans:

Inaugurating a university is inaugurating the future [...] Continuing to ask other countries to educate our students on their own posed a double danger: First, the so-called 'brain drain.'

⁸² Anika, 'Université du Bénin...', *Togo-Presse*, 13 January 1977.

⁸³ 'En dépit de certaines difficultés...', *Togo-Presse*, 5 November 1971.

⁸⁴ 'M. Malou a présidé...', *Togo-Presse*, 15 February 1972; 'Accroissement de l'aide...', *Togo-Presse*, 17 November 1973.

⁸⁵ 'L'amphithéâtre de 3000 places...', *Togo-Presse*, 30 November 1973.

⁸⁶ Voulé, 'L'Université nationale...', *Togo-Presse*, 27 May 1971.

⁸⁷ 'L'Université du Bénin: une...', *Togo-Presse*, 29 November 1973.

Trained by others, in touch with other people's realities, concerned about other people's needs, and tempted by comfort rather than the struggle of our young nationalism, the scholarship holders who had completed their studies did not return to their home countries. [...] Secondly, the inappropriateness of the structures of education provided in these countries no longer met our needs, because they obviously did not take into account our realities and the progress of our development. This education was not only inadequate in form, but it was also inadequate in content, because it kept our elites in a cultural alienation, an intellectual dependence that was detrimental to our true independence. If decolonisation brought us political independence, our development will lead us to economic independence, and it is the national university that will decolonise us intellectually, and all of these are sufficiently and intimately linked that one cannot go without the other. These are the main reasons why our government wants to educate its students locally. [...] No sacrifice is too great for the government when it comes to the future of young people, because young people are the Togo of tomorrow, the African we want to be.⁸⁸

The 'intellectual decolonisation of the Togolese people,' as articulated in a December 1973 editorial in *Togo-Presse*,⁸⁹ was central to the higher education reforms adopted just two years after the official creation of the University of Benin. At a 1972 press conference, Benoît Malou, then Minister of National Education, outlined recent government reforms in higher education. Malou emphasised the need for educational structures that were 'in tune with the realities of Togo and Africa in general.' He argued that past educational models, although effective, no longer aligned with the country's evolving economic and social landscape. Malou also criticised the arbitrary selection of academic disciplines, which often resulted in a surplus of graduates who were employable in public administration or the private sector but could not be sustained long-term.⁹⁰ In another press conference, he pointed out that the UB's initial structure mirrored that of European countries, particularly France. Malou stressed the urgent need to change mentalities by 'decolonising ourselves' (*nous décoloniser nous-mêmes*).⁹¹

A year later, an editorial in *Togo-Presse* titled 'Educational reform and decolonisation,' reiterated that the objectives of higher education reforms were to 'adapt education to the needs of the country, a young country, essentially agricultural and in the process of development', and to uphold the 'national sovereignty of a country which is in its second decade of independence and which must assert its personality in the concert of the great African family.' The editorial concluded that 'the reform has already begun, it will continue, and it will certainly achieve its goal: to

⁸⁸ 'L'amphithéâtre de 3000 places...', *Togo-Presse*, 30 November 1973.

⁸⁹ 'Editorial: une université...', *Togo-Presse*, 3 December 1973.

⁹⁰ 'M. Malou parlant de...', *Togo-Presse*, 1 September 1972.

⁹¹ 'Conférence de presse du recteur...', *Togo-Presse*, 7 October 1972.

train citizens who are intellectually decolonised, aware of our realities, educated for our needs and adapted to our personalities as Africans and Togolese.⁹² In 1979, the Vice Rector of the UB reported a 357% increase in student numbers between 1970 and 1979. Originally designed to accommodate 5,000 students by 1985, the university already had 3,208 students by the end of the 1970s.⁹³

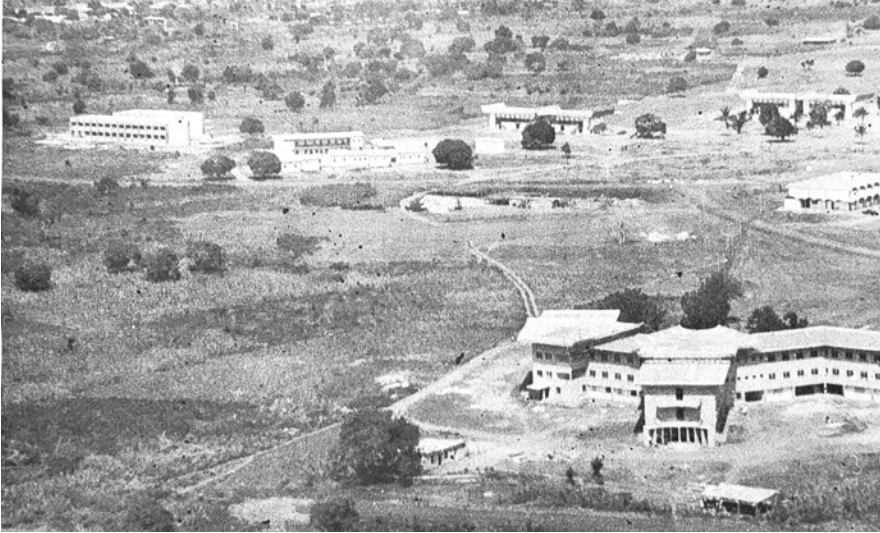


Fig. 6: Aerial photograph of the University of Benin campus in 1973.⁹⁴

The emergence of higher education in Benin and Togo in the 1970s was shaped by a complex interplay of political, social, and international factors. Both countries aimed to establish national universities as symbols of post-colonial emancipation and tools for nation-building, yet their paths to realising this vision were marked by distinct challenges and influences. In Benin, the creation of the University of Dahomey was driven by the expulsion of Beninese students from Dakar in 1968 and subsequent student movements demanding a national university. Togo's decision to establish the University of Benin was more directly tied to the dissolution of the joint IESB and the need to assert its own national identity in higher education. However, both universities initially depended heavily on French cooperation and resources, revealing the enduring legacies of colonialism and the challenges of

⁹² 'Editorial: réforme de...', *Togo-Presse*, 12 June 1973.

⁹³ 'Première réunion du grand...', *Togo-Presse*, 6 October 1979.

⁹⁴ 'Vue aérienne du Campus...', *Togo-Presse*, 29 November 1973.

forging truly independent institutions. The rhetoric surrounding the universities' founding emphasised their role in decolonisation, nation-building, and forming a new African elite. Yet, the realities of their establishment and operation often reflected the continued influence of external actors and models.

In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, student unions in Togo and Benin, like those elsewhere in Africa, were inspired by movements resisting colonisation and imperialism. Many African student leaders were strongly influenced by Third-Worldism, particularly the ideas of Frantz Fanon. Anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and Marxism were often intertwined in their visions for the future of African nations.⁹⁵ On both the Lomé and Abomey-Calavi campuses, the regimes attempted to install their own loyalists in charge of the institutions and student movements to stifle any open dissent.

2.3 The National University in Togo and Benin: Highly Politicised Institutions

This section explores the relationship between educational reform, political ideology and student activism in Togo and Benin from the 1970s to the end of the 1980s. Both regimes embarked on significant educational reforms in the 1970s, known as the 'New School' (*École Nouvelle*). Rather than emancipating education from its colonial past, the reforms often served as conduits for the propagation of the ruling party's ideology. The RPT's influence was particularly strong at the University of Benin. Statements by key figures, including President Eyadéma, reveal attempts to steer academic discourse and student activism within the ideological confines of the party. In Benin, Kérékou's promotion of the '*Université Nationale Nouvelle*' and the '*Coopérative universitaire*' as instruments of socialist transformation met with much more resistance. This section reflects upon the state's attempts to reassert control in the face of volatile campus politics and unrest, revealing the dynamics of power, resistance, and ideology that characterised this tumultuous period on the Abomey-Calavi campus.

The Enlistment of Youth in the RPT

Aligned with the policy of authenticity, the Togolese state enacted an educational reform known as the 'New School' (*École Nouvelle*) by decree on 6 May 1975. The

⁹⁵ Blum, Guidi, and Rillon 2016b, 24.

reform aimed to introduce two national languages (Ewe and Kabye) into the education system and ensure that all children under the age of 15 attended school free of charge.⁹⁶ Above all, the reform sought to ‘reject the work of alienation done by the colonial school’⁹⁷ and ‘destroy the myth of the “pure intellectual” with its derisory universality by confronting it with a citizen with a practical mind, rooted in the realities of Togo and Africa, a citizen with useful, concrete knowledge.’⁹⁸ However, rather than truly transforming the school inherited from colonialism, the educational reform enshrined the cult of Eyadéma in schools and maintained a pedagogy based on physical coercion.⁹⁹ As the then Minister of Education stated, ‘The educator’s task is to educate a citizen imbued with the ideals of the RPT and free from all prejudices harmful to the building of national unity.’¹⁰⁰

The UB was far from being an institution independent of the political and ideological influence of the RPT. In November 1973, during his speech at the official inauguration of the campus at its present site, President Eyadéma declared that:

If our university must not be closed to ideologies that can add something positive to the knowledge of our students, it must not become a convent of imported ideologies that generate disorder, hatred between people and political confusion. So be vigilant; be militant within the framework of the RPT, which has opened the way for dialogue with your elders.¹⁰¹

At the same ceremony, the university rector, addressing the students directly, said:

You must always bear in mind that what is true in Europe or elsewhere is not necessarily true in Africa, and that the University of Benin, like all African universities, has serious responsibilities towards the nation. Therefore, while your comrade from the old world is exhausting himself in a paralysing protest [...], you should know that after your studies you will be faced with serious tasks of national construction, and that any loss of time or gains will mean a regression in the march of progress.¹⁰²

At the RPT’s major national congress in Kpalimé in November 1971, one resolution, alongside upholding Eyadéma as leader and the role of the army in political life, called for the creation of a youth wing of the party. The first congress of the *Juvenesse du Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais* (Youth of the Togolese People’s Rally,

⁹⁶ ‘Objectif de la réforme...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 26 February 1975; Lange 1999, 135–51.

⁹⁷ K., ‘Réforme de l’enseignement...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 13 January 1978.

⁹⁸ Cited in Floriani 1987, 67.

⁹⁹ Toulabor 1986, 171.

¹⁰⁰ ‘M. Alassounouma a réuni...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 14 May 1979.

¹⁰¹ ‘L’amphithéâtre de 3000 places...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 30 November 1973.

¹⁰² ‘Le recteur JOHNSON...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 30 November 1973.

JRPT) in December formalised the ‘principle of a single movement for all Togolese youth’ within the framework of the single party.¹⁰³ The first resolution adopted by the congress stressed the need to create a unified movement of RPT youth because the ‘disparity of youth movements leads to disorderly outings without state control’ and that ‘this proliferation of movements and the lack of a coherent programme do not allow the development of an effective programme that takes into account the real aspirations of all Togolese youth.’¹⁰⁴ In February 1972, all other youth associations were dissolved by order of the Minister of the Interior.¹⁰⁵ The aim of the JRPT was to consolidate the unity of young people against ‘regionalism’ and ‘tribalism’, and to supervise, guide, and promote them to serve the country’s development.¹⁰⁶

According to the official discourse, before the creation of the JRPT, the Togolese youth were ‘disorganised, headless and then divided into a multitude of associations, secular or confessional, belonging to one or another of the many political parties of the time.’¹⁰⁷ Speaking at a conference on ‘The student movement before and after independence’, Fambaré Ouattara Natchaba, Chief of Staff to the President of the Republic, stated that since 1946, Togolese students had shown their determination to defend just causes. In response to anti-colonial and anti-imperialist themes, Togolese students had supported the struggle for the political liberation of their country. With a tradition of anti-imperialist resistance, the student movement rejected the Olympio regime as authoritarian, regionalist, neo-colonialist, and subordinate to imperialism. However, ‘the student movement must leave the field of systematic protest and take a more active and consistent part in the work of national construction to which the founding president of the RPT invites us.’¹⁰⁸

Regarding university students in particular, the *Union Nationale des Étudiants Togolais* (National Union of Togolese Students, UNETO), which had existed since 1961, was dissolved in 1977 because some of its members were involved in a network that distributed ‘defamatory, misleading, and seditious’ leaflets against President Eyadéma.¹⁰⁹ This incident led to a wave of arrests, including a dozen UB professors. They were released five months later in a highly publicised ceremony in which the minister, Kpotivi Tèvi-Djidjogbé Théodore Laclé, ‘invited the professors to make our university not an office of foreign ideology but a school for the new

103 ‘Après trois jours de congrès...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 20 December 1971.

104 ‘Un seul mouvement de jeunesse...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 23 December 1971.

105 ‘Les mouvements et associations...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 12 February 1972.

106 Borozé, ‘La Jeunesse du Rassemblement...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 9 March 1972.

107 Lamegu, ‘La JRPT: vigilance, conscience...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 27 April 1977.

108 Natchaba, ‘Le mouvement estudiantin...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 6 August 1979.

109 ‘Eclatant témoignage de la...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 7 October 1977.

march undertaken by Togo.¹¹⁰ In August 1977, UNETO was replaced by the *Mouvement National des Étudiants et Stagiaires Togolais* (National Movement of Togolese Students and Trainees, MONESTO) at a student congress held on the UB campus.¹¹¹

The President of the Consultative Committee of the Congress lamented that, unlike other sectors of the Togolese population, students remained unorganised. He emphasised that ‘at a time when intellectual demagoguery and political anarchism have become principles of thought and action for some academics, the Association of Togolese Students at the UB has been working for three years with the main objective of bringing together Togolese students to seek solutions to national problems within an appropriate framework.’¹¹² In the political commission’s report, delegates criticised ‘the complete demobilisation of the national student movement, which allows reactionary groups to carry out campaigns of intoxication of national and international opinion.’¹¹³ Consequently, MONESTO emerged as the sole Togolese student union until the liberalisation of the 1990s. On the UB campus, MONESTO was represented by the *Association des Étudiants Togolais de l’Université du Bénin* (Association of Togolese Students at the University of Benin, AETB).

These organisations primarily comprised Eyadéma loyalists. For instance, Tchaa-Kozah Tchelim, who served on the RPT Central Committee, was the general delegate of the JRPT in the early 1980s before becoming Minister of National Education and Scientific Research from 1987 to 1990. These organisations received extensive coverage in the national newspaper, *La Nouvelle Marche*. Their main activities, often attended by ministers or RPT Political Bureau members, included organising political and union training seminars for students and professors,¹¹⁴ combating neo-colonialism, imperialism, and apartheid,¹¹⁵ and staging demonstrations and petitions supporting President Eyadéma.¹¹⁶ They also organised agricultural weeks¹¹⁷ and pilgrimages to Sarakawa.¹¹⁸ Internationally,

110 ‘Les professeurs libérés ont...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 12 October 1977.

111 ‘Fin du congrès des étudiants...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 16 August 1977.

112 ‘Hier s’est ouvert à Lomé...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 9 August 1977.

113 ‘Fin du congrès des étudiants...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 16 August 1977.

114 ‘L’Université et l’Etat...,’ *La Nouvelle Marche*, 9 January 1981; ‘Les travaux du séminaire de...,’ *La Nouvelle Marche*, 5 December 1983; Attikossie, ‘Les étudiants togolais de l’UB...,’ *La Nouvelle Marche*, 3 April 1987.

115 ‘Le MONESTO a organisé hier...,’ *La Nouvelle Marche*, 28 February 1980; ‘Ouverture à Lomé d’un...,’ *La Nouvelle Marche*, 23 July 1984.

116 ‘Deux motions de félicitations...,’ *La Nouvelle Marche*, 1 October 1983; Adom, ‘À travers une gigantesque...,’ *La Nouvelle Marche*, 24 August 1987.

117 ‘MONESTO: une semaine agricole...,’ *La Nouvelle Marche*, 1 August 1983.

118 ‘Quinzaine culturelle de l’UB...,’ *La Nouvelle Marche*, 27 March 1984.

they maintained connections with groups like the All Africa Students Union (AASU) and the International Students Union (ISU).¹¹⁹



Fig. 7: Students on their way to the Maison du RPT.¹²⁰

The UB Council, along with Rectors Ampah Gabriel Johnson (1970–86) and Komlavi Francisco Seddoh (1986–95) – both members of the RPT Central Committee – were equally subservient to President Eyadéma. In October 1985, a council delegation led by Rector Johnson met with the president to distance themselves from the ‘misguided’ UB professors involved in the production and distribution of ‘misleading tracts’ about the regime, actions they claimed were ‘dangerously compromising the sacred mission of the university.’¹²¹ His successor, Rector Seddoh, addressing a MONESTO congress in 1986, expressed his hope ‘that the entire Togolese student community will not allow itself to be guided by any ideology other than that of the RPT’ and called for ‘greater vigilance in order to block the path of the slanderers of our policy.’¹²²

119 ‘M. Alassounouma a clôturé...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 12 April 1979.

120 ‘Après les diverses couches...,’ *La Nouvelle Marche*, 16 October 1985.

121 ‘Le Conseil de l’UB, après...,’ *La Nouvelle Marche*, 10 October 1985.

122 Assih, ‘Le 4^e congrès du MONESTO...,’ *La Nouvelle Marche*, 23 August 1986.

Marxism-Leninism and the ‘*Université Nationale Nouvelle*’: An Unruly Campus in Abomey-Calavi

The Revolution profoundly impacted the nascent National University of Benin. In his programmatic speech on 30 November 1972, President Kérékou described the existing education system as ‘colonial and neo-colonial’:

Until now, teaching, education and culture have served foreign domination and exploitation. Here, too, we need a new policy of national independence that breaks free from the constraints of traditional schooling that stifle our national values. From this point of view, it is imperative to establish a democratic and patriotic education system that will teach modern science and technology in the service of the people’s interests. To achieve this, a genuine reform of education in line with the new policy’s requirements is necessary.¹²³

Shortly thereafter, the GMR initiated a project to reform education in Dahomey, which materialised in May 1973 with the establishment of the National Commission for the Reform of Teaching and Education. The commission was tasked with developing a new education system that would be democratic, popular, free, compulsory, secular, and public. The goal was to ensure that all children in Dahomey, regardless of social, ethnic, religious, or linguistic background, had the opportunity to realise their full potential. Measures were therefore proposed to eliminate geographical and socio-religious barriers and social prejudices; university education was to be reimagined to prepare the nation’s future leaders.¹²⁴

In 1975, the ‘New School’ (*École Nouvelle*)¹²⁵ was formally introduced, incorporating collective agricultural work and the teaching of manual and artistic skills into the curriculum. Among the more radical measures was the nationalisation of religious schools, including Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic institutions.¹²⁶ By 1976, the reform extended to the university level, transforming the National University of Benin into an ‘authentically national, democratic university at the service of the country’s economic and social development and capable of training a large number of competent national cadres.’ According to Kérékou,

The National University of Benin [...] must henceforth play its full role in our present society, which we want to transform into a new society, a socialist society, where life will be good for everyone. A new type of Beninese citizen, politically and ideologically committed and aware

123 ‘Dahoméén, voici ton programme!’, *Daho-Express*, 1 December 1972.

124 Hounzandji 2021, 247–57.

125 ‘Loi d’orientation sur l’Ecole...’, *Ehuzu*, 17 July 1981.

126 ‘La situation entre l’Eglise...’, *Daho-Express*, 11 April 1974; ‘Conseil des ministres: prise...’, *Ehuzu*, 15 April 1976.

of the problems of his country; a new type of Beninese citizen, a convinced patriot, determined to participate actively and effectively in the economic and social development of his country [...]. In the same way, the National University of Benin, in addition to its primary mission of training qualified, conscious, politically and ideologically committed Beninese cadres, must also participate actively in the gigantic task of national development, by means of varied and in-depth scientific research which takes great account of the legitimate aspirations and daily concerns, as well as the fundamental interests, of the broad masses of our urban and rural population.¹²⁷

In 1980, on the 10th anniversary of the UNB, Kérékou admitted that the project of a *Université Nationale Nouvelle* had not been achieved ‘without bitterness and gnashing of teeth’:

Our university, the National University of Benin, must be considered [...] as a privileged means and a powerful weapon in the struggle to free ourselves from foreign domination and any system of oppression and exploitation of man by man. [...] In the face of the subversive actions of the reactionary forces who are trying and will continue to try in vain to undermine the management of the *École Nouvelle* and the *Université Nationale Nouvelle* with the cynical aim of jeopardising the achievement of their objectives, it is imperative that comrades, teachers, pupils, and students, as well as all comrades working in our schools and universities, redouble their revolutionary vigilance, mobilise, and organise themselves day and night, under the firm, clear-sighted and centralised leadership of our party [...] to ensure the defence of the homeland and the Beninese revolution.¹²⁸

Unlike President Eyadéma, who successfully suppressed all open protests on campus in the 1970s and 1980s, the situation at the Abomey-Calavi campus was far more volatile. From the 1950s onwards, students from Dahomey became prominent figures among their sub-Saharan African counterparts. Notably, Solange Faladé became the first president of the FEANE, following elections at the inaugural congress held in Paris in 1951. The creation of the *Association des Étudiants Dahoméens* (Association of Dahomean Students in France, AED) in 1955 and the subsequent creation of the UGEED in 1956 testified to the leadership role assumed by Dahomean students.¹²⁹

On 18 April 1974, the GMR announced the dissolution of all youth organisations in the country, including those of pupils and students. The student movement in Benin was quite large; 180 student organisations were dissolved at that time.¹³⁰ Before that, students had primarily been organised into two unions: the UGEED and

¹²⁷ Bibilary, ‘Inauguration officielle du...’, *Ehuzu*, 21 March 1980.

¹²⁸ ‘1980 sera une décennie de...’, *Ehuzu*, 15 December 1980.

¹²⁹ Hounzandji 2021, 69–83.

¹³⁰ Banégas 1997, 44.

the *Front d'Action Commun des Élèves et Étudiants du Nord* (Common Action Front of Pupils and Students of the North, FACEEN). In 1975, the *Coopérative Universitaire des Etudiants du Bénin* (University Students Cooperative of Benin, CUEB) was established as part of the *Organisation de la Jeunesse Révolutionnaire du Bénin* (Organisation of the Revolutionary Youth of Benin, OJRB).¹³¹ The Minister of Education, aiming to revolutionise the UNB, created the CUEB to involve students in agricultural production.¹³² The University Cooperative, responsible for student welfare, became the gateway to university residences, scholarships, and other benefits.

From 26 December 1977 to 7 January 1978, a 'patriotic and ideological training seminar' was held at the Médji Agricultural College in Sékou for students, administrators, and members of the University Cooperative. The GMR presented agricultural production as a hallmark of the 'new university' and a means of uniting the nation's youth. In his closing speech, President Kérékou stressed that the seminar aimed to revive revolutionary consciousness among participants and the student body. His speech also reflected the intent to break definitively with the oppressive ideologies of the past, which he described as irresponsible and intolerable anarchy. He highlighted the pernicious influence of exploitative ideologies that misled and victimised students. Kérékou outlined specific expectations for student leaders and members of the Cooperative, including the struggle for the implementation and triumph of the New School as a principle of production.¹³³

However, the Cooperative faced resistance from students. After the assassination of Captain Michel Aïkpé, a popular figure in the south, in June 1975, trade unionists and university students emerged as a constant challenge to Kérékou's regime. This event sparked widespread protests in the south and centre of the country. In January 1976, President Kérékou and the GMR visited the campus to meet with the rector, faculty deans, professors, students, and service staff 'to tell each other the truth' and to persuade UNB students and teachers to support the University Cooperative and to participate in agricultural production. A report in *Ehuzu* highlighted that the university was plagued by the 'virus of division' and the 'generally polluted atmosphere of student meetings,' characterised by the 'old demons of obstruction, protest, agitation, ineffective revolt, and anarchy.'¹³⁴

Many students' refusal to submit to this organisation led to the creation of the *Union des Étudiants Communistes du Dahomey* (Union of Communist Students of

131 Founded in 1983, the OJRB aimed to unite the intellectual and student youth with the masses of young workers and peasants. See Kérékou 1979, 316–24.

132 'L'Université nationale du Bénin...', *Ehuzu*, 19 January 1976.

133 Kérékou 1979, 182–87.

134 'L'Université nationale du Bénin...', *Ehuzu*, 19 January 1976.

Dahomey, UECD) in 1976, which categorically rejected Kérékou's socialist credentials. To unify students from UGEED and FACEEN, the *Groupes d'Unité d'Action Universitaire* (University Action Unit Groups, GUAU) were formed in 1977–78, aiming to end divisions among the youth. These groups played a leading role in the June 1979 student strike, demanding better living conditions and the abolition of the University Cooperative. The strike was harshly repressed, with many arrests and prison sentences for the movement's leaders, notably Issifou Yari Alassane. This temporarily curtailed all protests on the Abomey-Calavi campus.¹³⁵

Learning from the 1979 campus strikes, the revolutionary government sought to prevent any further challenges to its authority. Some PRPB members initiated the creation of an organisational framework for students committed to the revolution, leading to the formation of the *Mouvement Révolutionnaire Universitaire* (University Revolutionary Movement, MRU). Despite the 1979 repression, the new *Organisation de Lutte des Universitaires du Bénin* (Organisation of the Struggle of the University Students of Benin, OLUB), resumed the struggle on university campuses from 1980, aiming to improve students' living and working conditions and to oppose the PRPB state. This struggle led to the 1984 amnesty and the return of the students arrested in 1979. Their focus then shifted to the University Cooperative, aiming for the democratic election of its leaders by students. In March 1985, a congress of the Cooperative was organised, and the newly elected board included the leaders of the 1979 strike, including Issifou Yari Alassane. Dissatisfied with this takeover, Kérékou personally ordered its dissolution in April 1985. In protest, a massive strike ensued, quickly spreading to schools. The subsequent repression was brutal, resulting in the shooting of a student and mass arrests. Despite this, a new student organisation, the *Association des Scolaires et Universitaires du Bénin* (Association of Pupils and University Students of Benin, ASUB), was created between 1985 and 1986. It was within this organisation that students associated with the *Parti Communiste du Bénin* (Communist Party of Benin, PCB) would take part in the struggle that led to the fall of the PRPB, as discussed in Chapter 4.¹³⁶

The attempts by the regimes in Togo and Benin to use universities as instruments of nation-building and decolonisation, while simultaneously suppressing student activism and dissent, reveal the inherent contradictions and tensions in their approach to higher education. On the one hand, universities were conceived as symbols of post-colonial emancipation and tools for forging a new national identity, as evidenced by the rhetoric surrounding their founding and the emphasis on creating a new African elite. However, the regimes' efforts to steer academic

135 Université d'Abomey-Calavi 2016, 150–52.

136 Ibid.

discourse and student activism within the confines of their respective ideologies – Eyadéma’s authenticity and Kérékou’s Marxism-Leninism – often ran counter to the spirit of free inquiry and critical thinking central to the university’s mission. The suppression of student unions, arrests of dissenting voices, and attempts to control the curriculum exposed the limits of the regimes’ commitment to genuine intellectual decolonisation. These tensions highlight the challenges of transforming colonial educational legacies and the contested nature of university spaces in Africa, where the struggle for intellectual autonomy and democratic expression often clashed with the authoritarian tendencies of post-colonial regimes.

This chapter provided a historical overview of the revolutionary period in Benin and Togo, marked by the rise of military regimes and one-party states, and the establishment of the first public universities. It highlighted the ways in which politics and education intersected in the 1970s and 1980s. Eyadéma’s rule was marked by a patrimonial and dictatorial state, characterised by corruption, nepotism, and a strong cult of personality. In Benin, meanwhile, Kérékou ushered in a period of relative stability, in sharp contrast to the country’s previous political volatility. Both regimes adopted strict religious policies, such as the dissolution of certain religious sects in Togo, and strategically co-opted Christian and Muslim leaders. This served a dual purpose: it strengthened the regimes’ power structures while regulating religious practices and ensuring that they conformed to state ideologies.

The birth of higher education in Benin and Togo had a common origin. The creation of the IESB in 1965, a joint educational structure between Dahomey and Togo, was an important step in the development of higher education in both countries. The creations of the University of Dahomey in Abomey-Calavi and the University of Benin in Lomé in 1970 were not purely academic undertakings. These institutions were political projects, closely linked to the regimes’ broader nation-building and decolonisation agendas. They were conceived as instruments of social transformation, although they often reflected educational paradigms inherited from colonial powers. In Togo, the RPT’s tight grip on the University of Benin via loyalist student organisations and compliant administrators left little room for alternative perspectives. In Benin, despite facing greater resistance, Kérékou’s attempts to impose a ‘New University’ model based on socialist principles and agricultural production met with fierce opposition from students who rejected its ideological underpinnings.

As the following chapter will show, despite the repressive political atmosphere and the regimes’ attempts to control the universities, Christian and Muslim students in both countries managed to carve out spaces for religious expression and association. The emergence and evolution of these faith-based student groups were shaped by the specific political, ideological, and educational dynamics of the 1970s and 1980s. These associations had to navigate a delicate balance between

their religious identities and the demands of the authoritarian state, developing unique strategies to operate within the constraints imposed by the regimes. The next chapter will explore the tactics employed by Christian and Muslim student associations to establish their presence on campus, build solidarity among their members, and engage in religious activities despite the challenging circumstances.

3 Surviving in an Authoritarian Context: The First Faith-Based Student Associations on Campuses (1970s–80s)

This chapter examines the emergence of faith-based student associations on the campuses in Lomé and Abomey-Calavi during the politically charged decades of the 1970s and 1980s. It explores the interplay between local initiatives and transnational religious movements, highlighting that these associations were embedded in global networks of religious activism. The chapter also investigates the survival strategies that these groups employed under the authoritarian regimes of Presidents Eyadéma and Kérékou. Although both countries experienced strict control over religious and student bodies, the distinct political and ideological contexts shaped the opportunities and challenges faced by Christian and Muslim student groups differently, despite their similarities.

In Togo, the GBUST established a presence on the University of Benin campus in the mid-1970s. Despite not being officially recognised until 1987, the GBUST organised Bible study groups and other activities, benefiting from the relatively tolerant religious climate under Eyadéma's rule. In contrast, the GBEEB faced significant challenges under Kérékou's Marxist-Leninist regime. Founded in 1977, the GBEEB had to navigate the suppression of religious activities and the state's attempts to channel student activism into official organisations. Nonetheless, the GBEEB persisted by holding meetings in private homes, churches, and even in the open air on campus.

As for the JEC, it maintained a relatively strong presence on the University of Benin campus, partly due to the Eyadéma regime's decision to exempt religious youth movements from the ban on associations. Conversely, the JEC in Benin retreated to northern parishes, where political control was less intense, to survive. These differing experiences can be attributed, in part, to the perceived political and social potency of Christianity in these countries, with Christian groups seen as potentially more threatening to state authority, especially in Benin.

Muslim student associations, representing a religious minority in both countries, were perceived by authorities as less politically threatening. This perception is exemplified by the CIUB in Benin, which gained official recognition from the state in 1979. The regime's preference for centralised and hierarchical structures, along with its growing ties to the Arab-Muslim world, likely contributed to this relatively accommodating stance towards Muslims. However, these associations still faced challenges in asserting their presence on campus. This is evident in the delayed

creation of the JEIUB in Togo until 1987, partly due to the reluctance of Muslim students to draw attention to themselves in a politically sensitive environment.

These associations were far from passive recipients of state repression or international influence; they demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. They navigated complex socio-political landscapes, negotiated with university authorities, and even influenced state policy on religious practices on campus. In both countries, the relaxation of regimes in the 1980s provided new opportunities for these students to express their faith on campus. These faith-based associations not only provided spiritual refuge but also offered students alternative visions of the good life. By creating spaces for intellectual engagement and community building, they allowed students to pursue meaningful lives even within authoritarian contexts.

3.1 From Chad and Central African Republic to Lomé and Cotonou: The Creation of the First Bible Groups on Campus

This section traces the intertwined origins of the first evangelical student associations on the campuses of Lomé and Abomey-Calavi in the early 1970s. The *Groupes Bibliques Universitaires et Scolaires du Togo* (GBUST) and the *Groupe Biblique des Élèves et Étudiants du Bénin* (GBEEB) emerged from the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), a transnational student movement that began at Cambridge University in the late 19th century and spread to sub-Saharan Africa in the late 1950s. According to the official history of IFES, the group's origins date back to 1877, when Christian students at Cambridge University decided to study the Bible together and share their faith with peers. Similar initiatives soon sprang up on campuses in the United States, Canada, Norway, Sweden, Australia, and China. Throughout the 1930s, student groups emerged worldwide, culminating in 1947 with the founding of IFES by delegates from ten national movements at Harvard University.¹

The first university Bible groups in sub-Saharan Africa were established in 1958 after a British businessman visited several English-speaking universities. This led to the creation of the Pan African Fellowship of Evangelical Students (PAPES), with Ghana, Kenya, and later Nigeria as members. In Francophone Africa, a *Groupe Biblique Universitaire* (University Bible Group, GBU) in French-speaking Switzerland sent Louis Perret to establish Bible groups in the region's universities. He began in Dakar in 1965, followed by Abidjan in 1966, and Chad in 1967. In 1968, a congress of about 15 students in Abidjan gave birth to the pan-African movement

1 Hutchinson 2011; 'Our Story,' accessed 27 September 2022.

Groupes Bibliques Universitaires d'Afrique Francophone (University Bible Groups in Francophone Africa, GBUAF). In 1972, at the IFES International Congress in Austria, GBUAF became an affiliate of IFES.² Today, the organisation is present in over 180 countries.³

The Birth of the *Groupes Bibliques Universitaires et Scolaires du Togo* (GBUST)

The birth of GBUST in the mid-1970s exemplifies the resilience and adaptability of Christian students amid political instability and displacement. A pivotal figure in establishing the first Bible study group on the Lomé campus was Granga Daouya, a Chadian medical student. This highlights the significance of transnational connections and solidarity among Christian students. Due to the Chadian civil war (1965–79), many Chadian students, like Daouya, relocated within West Africa to continue their studies. During the 1974–75 academic year, Daouya, a former member of the *Union des Jeunes Chrétiens* (Union of Young Christians, UJC), initiated a Bible study group on the Lomé campus. He aimed to organise Bible studies with other Togolese students, including Théophile Lawson, Poidi Napo, and Corneille Sadzo-Hetsu, who were keen to share their faith.⁴ By 1981, driven by the UB Bible Group, additional chapters formed at the Lycée de Tokoin in Lomé and other high schools and colleges in Togo. However, GBUST, an interdenominational movement of all evangelical and Pentecostal missionary movements, was not officially established until its first national congress in 1987.⁵

The following year, as a sign of the dynamism of the UB Bible Group, its members organised the 8th Triennial Congress of the GBUAF. This event brought together 350 delegates from 23 countries in Lomé for over a week, focusing on the theme 'The African Intellectual in God's Design'. Pastor Agbi-Awumé, President of the *Conseil Chrétien du Togo* (Christian Council of Togo, CCT), initiated the proceedings, while a government liaison from the Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research attended on behalf of his minister. The conference emphasised the dual mandate of the African Christian intellectual: to be both present and vocal, to administer and to proclaim. Framed as God's active agents in society, Christian intellectuals were seen as bringing a unique message of divine love through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This role places a significant burden

² 'L'histoire des GBU,' accessed 15 February 2023.

³ 'Our Work,' accessed 15 February 2023.

⁴ Armand Dzadu, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 12 August 2021.

⁵ *Ibid.*

on Christian intellectuals to fulfil this dual mission of presence and proclamation, ethics and evangelism, strengthened by divine power. The closing remarks stressed that Africa's salvation is both economic and spiritual: 'Africa has a bright future, there is no doubt about it.' However, this promising future must be built by all Africans, especially African Christian intellectuals, who have a unique contribution to make. The speaker urged all delegates to fully embrace their role as evangelists, ensuring the Gospel reaches students from all socio-professional backgrounds.⁶ The active involvement of the *Groupe Biblique Universitaire du Bénin* in preparing the congress underscores the strong links between the two movements since their inception, highlighting the potential for collaboration and mutual support in their shared mission of evangelism and discipleship among students.



Fig. 8: A view of the delegates at the opening session of the 8th GBUAF Congress.⁷

⁶ Adom, '8^e congrès triennal des...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 3 August 1988; Adom, 'Fin du 8^e congrès triennal...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 12 August 1988.

⁷ Adom, '8^e congrès triennal des...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 3 August 1988.

GBUST's 'Little Brother': *The Groupe Biblique des Élèves et Étudiants du Bénin* (GBEEB)

In Benin, GBEEB was founded in December 1977, amidst the height of the Marxist-Leninist revolution. The inception of the first Bible group at the National University of Benin in Abomey-Calavi was catalysed by a Bible camp organised by students from Lomé in 1977. Isaac Zokoué, a Central African who was the secretary of GBUAF and former dean of the Faculty of Evangelical Theology of Bangui, intended to participate in the camp. During his journey to Lomé, he stayed at a church guesthouse in Sike, Cotonou. There, he requested that the pastor introduce him to young Christians he could bring to Lomé to learn about the Bible group. Barnabé Assohoto and Janvier Attignon, both high school students (*collège*), and Issifou Tapara, a medical student at the university, were selected. Assohoto and Attignon accompanied Zokoué to Lomé, where they received a Bible study dictionary endorsed by the nascent Benin Bible Group. Upon returning to Cotonou, they began collaborating with fellow students in high schools and colleges to launch the movement.⁸

The first meetings began in December 1977 at Attignon's home and later moved to the *Foyer évangélique des jeunes de l'UEEB* (Evangelical Youth Centre of the UEEB) by the end of 1978. In 1979, after Attignon obtained his BAC and was admitted to the *Complexe Polytechnique Universitaire* of the National University of Benin, the GBU of the Abomey-Calavi campus was formally established. That same year, Assohoto passed his baccalaureate and undertook his military and patriotic service as a teacher in a college, where he founded the *Groupe Biblique des Collégiens*. He mentored Barnabé Mensah, who also initiated the movement in Parakou under the auspices of his church, though this group was soon absorbed by the church. From 1980 to 1984, the GBEEB expanded to include three chapters: one in Cotonou, which conducted its activities at the reading centre of the *Église Baptiste Méridionale*, the GBU of the Abomey-Calavi campus, and a new chapter at the *Institut National de la Jeunesse et d'Éducation Physique et Sportive* (INJEPS) of Porto-Novo.⁹

However, the university Bible group in Lomé had a larger audience than the one in Abomey-Calavi, largely due to the challenges posed by the Marxist-Leninist revolution in Benin, which hindered GBEEB's activities.¹⁰ The association was not officially recognised by the state, and most school and college officials in Benin were reluctant to accept any religious activities for fear of reprisals. Nonetheless,

⁸ Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022; Jacob Djossou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 19 March 2022.

⁹ Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

¹⁰ Jacob Djossou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 19 March 2022.

some schools tolerated or accepted GBEEB activities, while other chapters organised their events in churches or in the open air. On the Abomey-Calavi campus, members resorted to using the hangar in *Bâtiment C*, as requesting classrooms was impossible.¹¹

In 1980, Augustin Ahoga moved to Abomey-Calavi to begin his university studies and was drawn to the Bible study sessions offered by GBU. Unlike traditional church settings where pastors led the discussions, GBU's approach had a deeper intellectual dimension, allowing participants to ask questions and learn the inductive method of Bible study. This profoundly impacted Ahoga. GBUAF had even sent a trainer with experience in Cameroon and Togo to enhance the students' Bible education.¹² Similarly, Jacob Djossou, another key figure in GBEEB, arrived in Abomey-Calavi in 1982 and discovered GBU through a friend's invitation. As a practicing Catholic, Djossou had begun questioning certain practices in the Catholic Church. Initially active in the Emmaüs Community – see below –, which focused on prayer and singing, Djossou was captivated by GBU's Bible study and 'began to see the difference between religion and becoming a real Christian.' This led him to leave the Emmaüs Community and join GBU, where he quickly became involved in GBEEB. Ahoga mentored Djossou, helping him deepen his Bible studies and lead the Tuesday night meetings, which attracted around 60 students.¹³ The Bible study groups at GBEEB had a profound impact on the intellectual and spiritual development of their members. The inductive approach encouraged a deeper, more analytical engagement with scripture, appealing to university students accustomed to critical thinking. For many, like Ahoga and Djossou, this method offered a new perspective on their faith and a profound understanding of Christianity. By fostering an environment of open dialogue, critical analysis, and shared learning, GBEEB not only strengthened the faith of its members but also equipped them with tools to navigate academic and personal challenges.

GBEEB's relationship with local churches was crucial to its survival and growth, especially during the challenging times of the Marxist-Leninist revolution. By the mid-1980s, GBEEB leaders began considering expanding the movement nationally. They realised that waiting until students were at university to share the Gospel was too late; they needed to reach out to colleges as well. In 1985, when GBEEB leaders decided to hold their first national camp in Za-Kpota, they faced significant obstacles due to the political climate. Ahoga and Djossou, accompanied by GBUAF's itinerant secretary, Djikolngar Maouyo, based in Lomé, visited major cities in Benin

¹¹ Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jacob Djossou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 19 March 2022.

to discuss GBEEB with church pastors and encourage them to send delegates to the camp for training in the group's vision. The Marxist revolution had made direct access to colleges and high schools impossible. They also received substantial support from a Baptist missionary who donated money and food.

Due to the student strike movement in Abomey-Calavi, the GBEEB leaders chose to hold the camp in Za-Kpota, a village near Bohicon. However, local authorities, informed of the camp by the prefecture, decided to ban the activity. About a hundred delegates from various churches across the country had already arrived. Ahoga and Djossou returned to Cotonou the same day, hoping to obtain permission from the Ministry of the Interior. The intervention of prominent religious leaders, such as Henry Harry, president of the Protestant Methodist Church of Benin, and Joseph Tamou, a senior evangelical civil servant, was instrumental in securing formal authorisation for the camp. Despite this, the local prefect assigned three military officers to monitor the camp, but according to Ahoga, 'they soon realised that these students were only talking about God'.¹⁴

The Za-Kpota camp in 1985 marks a pivotal moment in GBEEB's history and collective memory. Despite the initial ban and the presence of military officers, the camp was a resounding success. For many participants, the camp proceeding despite political opposition was a powerful testament to God's providence and protection. This event became a symbol of GBEEB's resilience and determination in the face of adversity and is celebrated as a defining moment in the movement's history. 'The participants saw the hand of God', said Ahoga.¹⁵ The Za-Kpota camp also marked a turning point in GBEEB's organisational development. Following the camp, GBEEB experienced significant growth, with the number of chapters rising to twelve across eight cities by 1986, including Abomey, Bohicon, Parakou, Kandi, and Djougou. The leaders also decided to organise national camps every two years to encourage the formation of new chapters. The second and third national camps were held in Abomey and Bohicon in 1987 and 1989, respectively. The establishment of a national office in 1988, under the leadership of Moïse Montcho, an agronomy student, further solidified GBEEB's institutional structure and paved the way for its future expansion. In the same year, Djossou and Ahoga travelled around the country to establish the Friends of GBEEB, a network of former members and supporters who joined the workforce to support groups in secondary schools and colleges. GBEEB also actively participated in the organisation of the 8th GBUAF Congress in Lomé with a delegation of nearly 50 people.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

¹⁶ Djossou 2013.

By 1988, the need for full-time staff to manage GBEEB nationally had become apparent. Ahoga took on this role. While at university, he realised the importance of working with students on campus: ‘Benin is the seat of Vodun. [...] I was saddened to see many students resorting to rituals and occult powers to pass their exams instead of studying. [...] These are the people who will run the country tomorrow. People who are not enlightened at all. What kind of development are they going to do?’¹⁷ After graduating with a master’s in economics, he decided to spend two years travelling around Benin as a volunteer. With no financial support, he offered home classes and relied on local churches for assistance. However, Ahoga realised that to be effective, he needed theological training, as discussing the Bible with university students differs from discussing it with uneducated people. He shared his plan to study in Vaux-sur-Seine, France, with GBEEB, and many activists contributed so he could buy his plane ticket. He also received financial support from the German organisation Bruder Hilfe to fund his first three years of study. He spent five years in France before returning to Benin,¹⁸ where he continued to play a central role in GBEEB throughout the 1990s.

Like the Bible study groups, the JEC, founded during the colonial period in both Togo and Benin, quickly gained a foothold on the campuses of the University of Lomé and the University of Abomey-Calavi. The story of the JEC during this period is one of regional disparities, resilience, and adaptation to the complex socio-political landscapes.

3.2 The *Jeunesse Étudiante Catholique* (JEC): Contrasting Paths in Togo and Benin

This section examines the historical development of the *Jeunesse Étudiante Catholique Universitaire* (JEC-U) in Togo and Benin. It highlights the unique ‘See-Judge-Act’ methodology that distinguishes this action movement from a traditional prayer group,¹⁹ emphasising its resilience in the face of political repression and its transformative impact on Togolese and Beninese students, both spiritually and intellectually. The section also profiles key figures instrumental in the creation and growth of the JEC during the 1970s and 1980s. While the JEC in Togo, like the other religious youth associations, managed to avoid dissolution in favour of the JRPT, the JEC in Benin faced greater challenges. Its activists retreated into the parishes,

¹⁷ Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 11 March 2022.

especially in the less policed north, to survive during the revolutionary period. On the Abomey-Calavi campus, the Emmaüs community provided Catholic students a platform to navigate faith and activism in a politically sensitive environment.

The *JEC Universitaire* (JEC-U) in Lomé and the See-Judge-Act

The *JEC Universitaire* (JEC-U) in Lomé became the first officially recognised faith-based student association at the UB. This Catholic action movement for the evangelisation of the school and student environment, now present worldwide, was founded in France in 1929.²⁰ In Africa, the first JEC was established in Madagascar in 1937. In Togo, the association '*Jeunesse et Culture*' (Youth and Culture) of the Collège Saint-Joseph in Lomé, created by Father Schmidt during the 1951–52 school year, became the JEC in July 1956. Subsequently, new chapters were created in other schools in Lomé and expanded to Sokodé in 1966, Atakpamé in 1967, and to Dapaong in the north in 1970.²¹ Like other Christian movements operating in parishes and schools, such as the *Légion de Marie* or the *Cœurs Vaillants-Âmes Vaillantes* (CV-AV), the JEC avoided the abolition of youth movements. The bishops of the Catholic Church argued that these Catholic action movements were apolitical and that the spiritual training offered by these groups did not contradict the ideals of the RPT.²²

In February 1972, shortly after the Minister of the Interior issued a decree dissolving all youth movements and associations other than the JRPT, *Togo-Presse* published a correction. The amended statement from the Minister clarified that religious youth movements and associations, in accordance with the statutes of the JRPT, were exempt from the decree's provisions.²³ In a press interview the following month, Emile Borozé, the first president of the JRPT, reiterated that 'the religious denominations accepted by Togolese society have the possibility of providing their young followers, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, etc., with appropriate religious education.' However, he emphasised that, as full citizens, they had the same rights and duties as everyone else, implying that one could not be a good Togolese citizen if detached from the JRPT.²⁴

In Togo, Catholic action movements and prayer groups were very popular, particularly as priests encouraged children to join them after the sacrament of con-

²⁰ Barbiche and Sorrel 2011; Giroux 2013.

²¹ Broohm, 'Il y a 45 ans, naissait...', *Togo-Presse*, 13 February 2001; JEC Togo 2018, 4–7.

²² Pierre Radji, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 30 August 2021.

²³ 'Les associations de jeunesse...', *Togo-Presse*, 17 February 1972.

²⁴ 'M. Boroze: bientôt des...', *Togo-Presse*, 18 March 1972.

firmation,²⁵ typically occurring around CM2 or *classe de sixième*.²⁶ In high schools and colleges, the JEC organised numerous activities to help students live their faith, evangelise their environment, and train themselves intellectually and spiritually. These activities included meetings, friendship days, spiritual formation, recollections, spiritual vigils, Lenten walks, retreats, communal prayer, visits to the sick, and multi-day training camps. As one JEC member explained, there were few activities to occupy students during school vacations apart from those organised by JRPT and MONESTO, which significantly contributed to the popularity of the JEC national camps.²⁷ In the 1980s, these camps could attract between 150 and 300 participants.²⁸

At the heart of the social curriculum offered by the JEC is its ‘methodology’ of analysis and action, known as *Voir-Juger-Agir* (VJA, or See-Judge-Act). This method has profoundly impacted many former JEC members by ‘awakening in young people an awareness of the problems of their environment (See), fostering a transforming reflection in the light of Christian values (Judge), and encouraging the necessary action to improve their living conditions (Act).’²⁹ A former JEC member, now a professor at the University of Lomé, shared how the JEC helped him overcome his agoraphobia and shyness:

When you are in the JEC, you learn how to speak in public. [...] You are forced to speak and talk with your brothers and sisters who are in the movement [...] You learn how to be responsible, how not to run away from responsibility. [...] You also learn to talk to those who are older and more educated than you. [...] And when I said that it has an impact on your life, it obviously has an impact at home. Parents sense that something has changed. If you have been turbulent or if you have been a bit unruly or lazy, they feel that something has changed.³⁰

Similarly, another former JEC member highlighted that the association was well-regarded by most parents and school principals. Good academic results were strongly encouraged within the JEC, fostering a sense of emulation among pupils. ‘Parents saw the JEC in a very positive light because it motivated everyone to live a disciplined life in and out of school’, he noted.³¹

25 Sabin Sonhaye, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

26 In Togo, primary education is organised into three levels: *cours préparatoire* (CP1 and CP2), *cours élémentaire* (CE1 and CE2) and *cours moyen* (CM1 and CM2). Secondary education begins with the *classe de sixième* and ends with the *Brevet d’Études du Premier Cycle* (BEPC).

27 Albert Akakpo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 2 September 2021.

28 Pierre Radji, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 30 August 2021.

29 ‘Statuts et règlements intérieur de la Jeunesse étudiante Catholique (JEC) du Togo’ 2012.

30 Pierre Radji, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 30 August 2021.

31 Théophile Tonyeme, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 7 September 2021.

However, it was not until 1981 that the JEC was established on the UB campus as a continuation of the school-based JEC. Two students drove JEC-U's growth: Albert Akakpo and Pierre Radji, considered the main pioneers, and who became leaders in the 1980s. Akakpo began his JEC activism in Atakpamé in the early 1970s, while in the *classe de quatrième*. His involvement deepened in the *classe de première*, leading to his appointment as a delegate for the Diocese of Atakpamé to the JEC national office. Upon arriving on campus, Akakpo and other former JEC members realised that the university environment differed greatly from high schools and colleges, necessitating a specific framework for university students.³²

Bertin Agbobli-Atayi, now Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Lomé, also played a central role in the creation and development of the JEC-U. A doctor of history from the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne³³ and then a professor in the history department at UB and campus chaplain, Agbobli-Atayi had a background as a *Jéciste* and former national chaplain of the JEC. He encouraged Akakpo to quickly establish a university branch of the JEC, fearing that Catholic students might be drawn to create a Togolese section of the *Mouvement International des Étudiants Catholiques* (International Movement of Catholic Students, MIEC/IMCS), which was not formalised until 1990.³⁴

Throughout the 1980s, the JEC in Togo and on the UB campus flourished. Affiliated with the International Young Catholic Students (IYCS) from 1982, it maintained connections with national organisations in other west African countries, including Burkina Faso and Benin, through the *Coordination de la JEC ouest-africaine* (West African YCS Coordination). The JEC Togo was even tasked with 'secretly' cooperating with the JEC in Benin, operating under the Marxist-Leninist regime there. As the national head of the JEC, Akakpo participated in several meetings in Benin, often fearing repercussions from the authorities. He recalled, 'I remember one day we were forced to hold the meeting in the bedroom where all windows and doors were closed.'³⁵ Akakpo also represented Togo at the first congress of the Pan-African Council of the JEC in Nairobi in 1986, and at the World Council held in Kenya the same year.³⁶ While the JEC in Togo thrived, its counterpart in Benin struggled to survive under a regime hostile to its activities.

³² Albert Akakpo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 2 September 2021.

³³ Agbobly-Atayi 1980.

³⁴ Albert Akakpo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 2 September 2021.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

The Resilience of the JEC-Benin: Retreat to Parishes in the North of the Country

In Benin, the Catholic Church's contribution to the intellectual formation and socialisation of the elite is undeniable, dating back to the colonial period. After the Second World War, Catholic missionaries founded two emblematic educational institutions in Cotonou: the Père Aupiais College for boys and the Cours Secondaire Notre Dame des Apôtres for girls. These institutions quickly became some of the most prestigious in the country. Beyond formal schooling, the Church influenced youth education through various associations. The first *Fédération de la Jeunesse Catholique du Dahomey* (Catholic Youth Federation of Dahomey), founded in 1935, and the JEC, established in 1956,³⁷ served as platforms for spiritual engagement. Catholic journalism also played an important role, particularly through the influential magazine *La Croix du Dahomey*, later renamed *La Croix du Bénin*. Its first issue was published in April 1946, and it has continued to exert considerable influence on public discourse.³⁸

On the campus of Abomey-Calavi, the Catholic Chaplaincy of the National University of Benin was founded in 1972, initiated by Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, then Archbishop of Cotonou, who enlisted the Dominican friars to assist with pastoral work at the university. The chaplaincy, known as the Emmaüs Community and affiliated with the MIEC/IMCS, aims to help Catholic students live their faith through prayer meetings, catechetical classes, and eucharistic celebrations organised on campus. The Dominican friars were initially based in the Gbgamey district in Cotonou before acquiring the land for the Saint-Dominique Cotonou convent. According to the current chaplain of the University of Abomey-Calavi, who was himself a student on the campus during the Marxist revolution, although the regime was anti-religious, the Dominicans were known for their tenacity and commitment to the students. This was evident during the events of May 1968 at the Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar,³⁹ where President Léopold Sédar Senghor vehemently accused the French Dominicans, who were university chaplains, of instigating communist-inspired student riots.⁴⁰ Catholic students in Abomey-Calavi in the 1970s and 1980s could profess their faith but had to be cautious. They were advised not to expose themselves unnecessarily or to openly provoke the authorities, which could lead to severe consequences. However, some members of the Emmaüs Community

³⁷ Hlannon, 'Bénin: les étudiants catholiques...', *La Croix Africa*, 3 September 2021.

³⁸ Mayrargue 2007, 303–04.

³⁹ Ephrem Cyprien Houndje, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 14 March 2022.

⁴⁰ Foster 2019, 56–57.

were imprisoned in Segbana, in the north of Benin, due to their activism against the regime.⁴¹

As for the JEC, it had to officially cease its activities during the revolutionary period when the government sought to channel all school and student movements into state-controlled organisations, as previously mentioned. According to a former *Jéciste*, government surveillance was particularly intense in Cotonou, where political power was highly centralised. Political control was so tight that there was no room for movements like the JEC that deviated from the government's ideology. The only activities allowed were those under the auspices of scout organisations, particularly the CV-AV. As a result, the JEC was effectively forced out of educational institutions, including the University of Abomey-Calavi, and had to retreat to parishes to survive, although even there they were closely monitored.⁴²

In northern Benin, particularly in the dioceses of Parakou and Natitingou, the JECs continued to operate, largely due to relatively relaxed state control in the region. During this period, Pacôme Elet emerged as a key figure. Initially a member of CV-AV in Nikki, Elet joined the JEC in 1983, inspired by a camp organised by the Parakou JEC in his hometown. He actively participated in JEC meetings and activities in Parakou until 1985, when he moved to Cotonou for higher education. According to him, the state recognised a certain authority of the Catholic Church by allowing religious activities in parishes on condition that public order and discretion were maintained. This tacit understanding permitted the Church, particularly in the north, to operate within prescribed boundaries without direct government interference. The regime's campaign against witchcraft inadvertently granted the Church additional operational space, albeit within strict limits.⁴³ The contrasting levels of government influence in the north and south significantly impacted the activities of the JEC. While the organisation remained largely dormant in southern regions until the democratisation of the early 1990s, its northern counterparts skilfully navigated the political landscape. By maintaining their activities in the face of political repression, the JEC provided students with a sense of purpose and community, essential elements in their pursuit of the good life during challenging times.

Meanwhile, Muslim students at the Abomey-Calavi campus proactively established their own association in the mid-1970s, just a few years after the Emmaüs Community. In Togo, official permission granted to Catholic students to set up a JEC chapter on the Lomé campus encouraged Muslims to do the same from the mid-1980s. The governments of Benin and Togo were particularly sympathetic to their

41 Ephrem Cyprien Houndje, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 14 March 2022.

42 Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.

43 Pacôme Elet, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

Muslim communities, likely influenced by both countries' diplomatic outreach to Muammar Gaddafi's Libya. This geopolitical orientation towards closer ties with Libya may have shaped the governments' accommodating policies towards Muslim student organisations.

3.3 Closer Links with Libya and the Creation of an Islamic Association on the Abomey-Calavi and Lomé Campuses

In Benin and Togo, the minority status of Muslim students presented both challenges and strengths. Unlike the Catholic Church, perceived as a dominant societal entity and viewed with suspicion by the state, Muslims were seen as less likely to form a significant political opposition. In Benin, Muslims were more receptive to Western education than their counterparts in many West African countries, leading to the early emergence of Muslim youth and student associations, even during the colonial period. The establishment of the *Communauté Islamique Universitaire du Bénin* (CIUB) on the Abomey-Calavi campus in the 1970s and the *Jeunesse Etudiante Islamique de l'Université du Bénin* (JEIUB) on the Lomé campus in the late 1980s provided platforms to address social inequalities faced by Muslim students and promote Islamic identity.

Growing cooperation with Libya in the 1970s and 1980s significantly impacted the development of Muslim student associations in both countries. This diplomatic relationship enabled Islamic NGOs to provide financial and material support for constructing mosques, Islamic centres, and educational institutions. These transnational connections empowered Muslim student associations by offering resources, legitimacy, and a sense of belonging to a larger global community. However, they also exposed these groups to greater state scrutiny, as the governments in Benin and Togo sought to balance foreign policy objectives with domestic concerns about the influence of external actors on national politics and religious dynamics.

The *Communauté Islamique Universitaire du Bénin* (CIUB): Heir to a Long Tradition of Organisations of Western-Educated Muslims

In southern Benin, the roots of Western education date back to the 17th century, particularly due to the Portuguese presence and the partial assimilation of Afro-Brazilians into Western culture. This historical context led many Muslims in the

region to enrol their children in colonial schools.⁴⁴ By the 1930s, Yoruba bourgeois and commercial intellectuals in Porto-Novo recognised the relative disadvantage of Muslim students compared to their Christian peers. They therefore founded the Ançarou-Dine Association to combat the social injustices faced by Muslim students in public schools. A significant milestone for the association was achieved in 1936 with the establishment of the Léon Bourguine private Muslim primary school. Named in honour of the governor of the time, this institution uniquely combined the official French curriculum with religious education.⁴⁵

In 1945, a group of Muslim civil servants created the *Jeunesse Musulmane Franco-Dahoméenne* (Franco-Dahomean Muslim Youth, JMFD) in 1945. This organisation sought to advance Islam through French-language education and published a quarterly bulletin, *Islam-Dahomey*, to disseminate Islamic teachings. In 1948, Parrinder observed ‘the efforts of justification and propaganda undertaken by some of the younger, educated members of the community’ in Dahomey, noting their active role in promoting Islamic values:

In April 1945 there appeared, in French, the first number of a quarterly bulletin entitled *Islam-Dahomey*, with the explanatory sub-title of *Bulletin trimestriel de liaison et de documentation de l'Association culturelle et d'entre-aide dite 'Jeunesse Musulmane Franco-Dahomeenne'*. [...] The Association which it represents was founded in the same year, and had as first president M. Serpos Tidjani, an employee of the Institut Français d'Afrique Noire in Dahomey. [...] The most striking side of *Islam-Dahomey* is the manifest attempt to conciliate Christian and educated opinion, and even to copy Christian method and spirit. This new propaganda of Islam has nothing of the old fanaticism, which is explicitly renounced. It is Islam aware of the necessity of justifying its faith and practice, and conscious of the impact of Christianity upon its faith and morals.⁴⁶

Although the JMFD had a relatively brief existence, it served as a precursor to new Islamic associations in the 1950s, such as the *Élite Musulmane du Dahomey* (Muslim Elite of Dahomey, EMD). The EMD focused not only on educating its members in proper Islamic practice, but also on actively defending the rights of Muslim students in secondary schools and colleges. It published a magazine called *La Voix de l'Islam*.⁴⁷ In 1956, the EMD supported the establishment of the *Jeunesse Étudiante Musulmane du Dahomey* (Muslim Student Youth of Dahomey, JEMD) at the prestigious Collège Classique et Moderne Victor Ballo in Porto-Novo, a key institution for

⁴⁴ Marty 1926.

⁴⁵ Miran 2005, 49; Abdoulaye 2007, 117.

⁴⁶ Parrinder 1948.

⁴⁷ Abdoulaye 2007, 118.

training cadres for the colonial administration.⁴⁸ Throughout the 1960s, the association addressed misunderstandings within the Islamic community by emphasising the fundamental principles of Islam, such as belief in the oneness of God, prayer, almsgiving, pilgrimage to Mecca, and annual Zakat. The association mainly used French as a medium of communication, which helped integrate members from different ethnic backgrounds, given the country's linguistic diversity.⁴⁹ Under the leadership of JEMD's first president, Machioudi Dissou, the association played a key role in forming the *Union Islamique du Dahomey* (Islamic Union of Dahomey, UID), which later became the *Union Islamique du Bénin* (Islamic Union of Benin, UIB).⁵⁰ After independence in 1960, the JEMD evolved into the *Jeunesse Musulmane du Dahomey* (Muslim Youth of Dahomey, JMD), and later the *Jeunesse Musulmane du Bénin* (Muslim Youth of Benin, JMB).⁵¹

The 1970s creation of a Muslim students' association on the Abomey-Calavi campus occurred against the backdrop of a reorientation of Benin's foreign policy. This shift was part of the country's non-aligned stance under the Military Revolutionary Government. A notable example of this diplomatic repositioning was a high-level delegation led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs that embarked on an international tour in February 1973. This tour included stops in North Korea, various Middle Eastern countries, and several African states, with a particularly significant visit to Libya.⁵² In the same year, Egypt established a resident diplomatic mission in Benin,⁵³ and in October 1973, Benin severed relations with Israel, signalling a rapid opening to the Arab-Muslim world.⁵⁴ Benin also strengthened its ties with Kuwait.⁵⁵ These foreign policy developments facilitated the operation of Islamic NGOs in Benin, as evidenced by the visit of the Muslim World League (MWL) to Cotonou in June 1973.⁵⁶ In 1985, the Al Fayçal Medical Centre was inaugurated in Porto-Novo, financed entirely by the MWL and donors from Saudi Arabia.⁵⁷

Cooperation with Libya, initiated by bilateral agreements on 27 August 1976,⁵⁸ became a cornerstone of Benin's foreign policy during the revolutionary era. This

48 Miran 2005, 49–50.

49 Séidou Mama Sika, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 5 April 2019.

50 Machioudi Dissou, in conversation with the author, Porto-Novo, 11 March 2019.

51 Brégand 2012, 483–84.

52 'Signature d'un protocole...', *Daho-Express*, 2 April 1973.

53 Assevi, 'Les relations bénino-égyptiennes...', *La Nation*, 19 January 1995.

54 'Rupture des relations diplomatiques...', *Daho-Express*, 10 October 1973.

55 'Pour le renforcement des liens...', *Ehuzu*, 2 November 1977.

56 'Une délégation de la Ligue...', *Daho-Express*, 19 June 1973.

57 'Ouverture du centre médical...', *Ehuzu*, 13 August 1985.

58 Dogue, 'Coopération Bénin-Libye...', *La Nation*, 7 September 2010.

alliance led to the establishment of two Benin-Libya companies in 1978⁵⁹ and culminated in President Kérékou's official visit to Libya in September 1980.⁶⁰ During this trip, Kérékou reportedly converted to Islam and adopted the name Ahmed, though this was never officially confirmed. An article in *Ehuzu* recounted the visit, describing how Gaddafi expressed his wish for Kérékou to convert to Islam, suggesting it might inspire the entire Beninese population to follow suit. Kérékou responded with humour, demonstrating his familiarity with the Qur'an by recalling a past challenge to the sincerity of Beninese Muslims. Impressed, Gaddafi declared that Kérékou would henceforth be known as Ahmed Kérékou in all official correspondence, even offering a special flight to Mecca and a grand reception by the King of Saudi Arabia.⁶¹ The incident's significance reverberated beyond Benin's borders, with Togo's *La Nouvelle Marche* boldly proclaiming on its front page: 'From now on in Benin: President Ahmed Kérékou instead of Mathieu Kérékou'.⁶²

Gaddafi's first official visit to Benin in April-May 1983⁶³ marked a significant milestone in bilateral relations between the two countries. It included a notable trip to Porto-Novo, where Gaddafi met with prominent figures from the Muslim community.⁶⁴ The visit particularly benefited the Muslim community through the support of the Libyan Islamic NGO, the World Islamic Call Society (WICS).⁶⁵ The WICS funded the construction of mosques,⁶⁶ a hospital in Porto-Novo, an Islamic centre in Cotonou,⁶⁷ and provided medical aid.⁶⁸

During this period, Benin distinguished itself as one of the sub-Saharan African countries with the highest number of students receiving scholarships in Libya.⁶⁹ A notable manifestation of this cooperation was the construction of the *Institut de la Langue Arabe et de la Culture Islamique* (Institute of Arabic Language and Islamic Culture, ILACI) at the National University of Benin, financed entirely by Libya. At the foundation stone ceremony in October 1979, the Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Letters, Arts, and Humanities highlighted that the institute would serve as a linguistic bridge between the Libyan and Beninese peoples. The Minister of Technical

59 'Signature de statuts régissant...', *Ehuzu*, 12 September 1978.

60 Assevi, 'Visite d'Etat et d'amitié...', *Ehuzu*, 1 October 1980.

61 Toï, 'Fin de la visite du président...', *Ehuzu*, 29 September 1980.

62 'Au Bénin désormais: Président...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 29 September 1980.

63 Assevi, 'Une solidarité agissante', *Ehuzu*, 29 April 1983.

64 Adissoda, 'Le président Kadhafi rencontre...', *Ehuzu*, 2 May 1983.

65 Houehou, 'Un envoyé spécial du colonel...', *Ehuzu*, 4 November 1983.

66 'Borgou: pose de la première...', *Ehuzu*, 10 October 1979.

67 Videgla, 'Le nouvel hôpital de Porto-Novo...', *Ehuzu*, 21 July 1986.

68 'Bénin-Libye: un exemple...', *Ehuzu*, 22 November 1983.

69 Mattes 1993.

and Higher Education underscored that the establishment of the ILACI represented Benin's political commitment to fostering a privileged channel of cooperation between the two nations, both dedicated to the liberation struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, Zionism, and apartheid.⁷⁰ In May 1983, during his official visit to Benin, President Gaddafi toured the ILACI construction site, which had an estimated cost of 562 million CFA francs. On this occasion, Gaddafi received an honorary doctorate from the National University of Benin.⁷¹ In addition to ILACI, Libya also donated scientific and technical equipment to the university.⁷²

Kérékou's supposed conversion, despite lacking official verification – unlike his counterpart Omar Bongo in Gabon –, symbolised an alignment with Gaddafi and the Arab-Muslim world. This realignment was driven by ideological, economic, and geopolitical factors, including Benin's non-aligned movement stance, the pursuit of investment from oil-rich Arab states, and countering neighbouring countries' Western affiliations. For Muslims in Benin, Kérékou's actions signalled increased recognition and potential state support for Islamic education and institutions, as seen in projects like ILACI. However, these developments did not fundamentally alter the Beninese state's Marxist-Leninist ideology or shift the power dynamics between religious groups. The PRPB regime maintained strict control over religious activities and Muslim students continued to operate within a challenging political environment. Kérékou's 'conversion' and the broader shift in Benin's foreign policy can be viewed as efforts to balance domestic political needs with external geopolitical pressures. By fostering relationships with countries like Libya, Kérékou aimed to enhance his legitimacy and secure economic and political support for his regime.

In this context of shifting political and religious landscapes, the *Communauté Islamique Universitaire du Bénin* (CIUB) emerged as a significant entity. The exact date of its creation varies, with some claiming it was founded in 1975 and others in 1978. Initially, the CIUB operated informally for several years, gradually consolidating its presence on campus. It served as a representative body for the Muslim community at the university, encompassing not only students but also Muslim professors, administrators, and other university staff. However, the student body formed the core of the CIUB.⁷³ Prominent figures in the early development of the CIUB included Abdoul-Afis Ambékéma, Oumar Chitou, and Nassirou Bako-Arifari, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs in the government of President Boni Yayi

70 Dossavi, 'Coopération bénino-libyenne: pose...', *Ehuzu*, 9 October 1979.

71 Adissoda, 'Visite du président Moammar...', *Ehuzu*, 2 May 1983.

72 Gbaguidi, 'Don de la Libye...', *Ehuzu*, 6 December 1985.

73 Ibrahima Mama Sirou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 8 May 2019.

and currently Special Envoy for Africa of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).⁷⁴

In 1979, the CIUB became the first faith-based student association at the UNB to be officially recognised by the state. According to Bako-Arifari, the state did not oppose the creation of the CIUB because Kérékou's revolutionary regime preferred to work with centralised and hierarchical organisations. As a result, the CIUB was legally affiliated with the UIB, functioning as its university branch and maintaining close collaboration with UIB leadership. The integration of the CIUB into the organisational structure of the UIB was such that the university was effectively treated as a separate administrative entity, similar to the other six administrative departments ('provinces') under the UIB's jurisdiction. While there were occasional disagreements over the management of the UIB, CIUB officials generally maintained a respectful relationship with Imam Liamidi Kélani, the then-President of the UIB. Efforts to extend the CIUB's influence beyond the university, particularly to secondary school students, met with resistance from the revolutionary government. This led CIUB leaders to pursue alternative strategies, such as encouraging the formation of Muslim students' associations in various regions of Benin. However, these efforts had mixed results and caused some dissension within the CIUB.⁷⁵

Bako-Arifari, who became actively involved in the CIUB upon arriving at the National University of Benin in 1984, assumed the presidency of the organisation in 1987. In the same year, he was also elected president of the *Coopérative Universitaire*. Under his leadership, the CIUB focused on facilitating religious practice on campus. This included efforts to secure prayer spaces, organise celebrations of Muslim holidays, and initiate the construction of a mosque, although the latter did not materialise. The CIUB maintained links with prominent transnational Islamic youth organisations such as the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) and the WICS.⁷⁶ For instance, in August 1983, an international Islamic youth camp was held in Porto-Novo, sponsored by WAMY and the OIC. The camp, which attracted about one hundred participants from Nigeria, Niger, Upper Volta,⁷⁷ Togo, and Benin, focused on 'The Role of Young Muslims in Nation-Building'. According to Ambékéma, the event significantly heightened participants' awareness of their critical role in national development. The camp featured various lectures and religious activities, culminating in a closing session attended by eminent Islamic leaders

⁷⁴ Mouhamed Ehi-Olou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 22 April 2019.

⁷⁵ Nassirou Bako-Arifari, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 26 May 2019.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Now Burkina Faso.

from Cotonou and Porto-Novo, as well as Muslim government officials, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation.⁷⁸

The CIUB also engaged with groups of students, preachers, and Arabic teachers from Egypt as part of the cooperation between Benin and Egypt. CIUB organised Arabic language courses on the Abomey-Calavi campus, as well as sermons and conferences with guest preachers to enhance the community's understanding of Islamic teachings. Despite the return of Beninese students from Islamic universities in the Arab world since the 1970s, the CIUB remained free of intense ideological debates between different Islamic currents. Its members were united in their efforts, focusing on common goals rather than ideological divisions. One of the main challenges facing the CIUB in the 1980s was addressing the limited knowledge of Islam among Muslim students on campus. Many students, though born Muslim, experienced a reawakening of their faith at university. To support this rediscovery, the CIUB leadership initiated training programmes tailored to their needs. While not all members of the CIUB's executive committee were fluent in Arabic, the central imam was required to have both a strong command of the language and a deep understanding of Islam.⁷⁹ In contrast to developments in Benin, the establishment of a Muslim students' association on the Lomé campus occurred much later.

Last in Line on the Lomé Campus: *The Jeunesse Etudiantine Islamique de l'Université du Bénin (JEIUB)*

In Togo, the evolution of Muslim youth organisations was less dynamic than in Benin, with only one notable group emerging prior to the establishment of the JEIUB in 1987. In 1963, Kassim Mensah founded the *Association de la Jeunesse Musulmane du Togo* (Association of Muslim Youth of Togo, AJMT). Originally Christian and of Ewe ethnicity, Mensah converted to Islam in 1935. He pursued Arabic and religious studies in Morocco and Abidjan. Upon returning to Togo, Mensah dedicated four years to teaching religion and extensive study. The AJMT provided religious education and leisure activities, supplementing familial religious knowledge without requiring Arabic proficiency. AJMT's leisure activities included folklore and sports such as football and boxing, supported by equipment donations from the National Association of Muslim Youth of Cairo. In 1968, the Embassy of the United Arab Republic in Lomé invited Mensah, as President of the AJMT, to participate in the

78 'Ouémé: rendez-vous de...', *Ehuzu*, 25 August 1983.

79 Nassirou Bako-Arifari, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 26 May 2019.

Fourth Islamic Research Conference at Al-Azhar University.⁸⁰ According to Delval, by 1980, the association had 800 members in Lomé, with branches in Sokodé, Atakpamé, and Kpalimé. When the Togolese government attempted to merge all youth organisations into the JRPT, Mama Fousséni of the UMT successfully intervened to exempt religious groups from this mandate.⁸¹

The creation of the JEIUB at the university was largely due to the efforts of students M. S. Mizim'ma Toukounte, Tchibara Aléitchérédji, and Mohamed Tchassona Traoré. When Toukounte arrived on campus in 1983, he observed a stark contrast: Catholic students had organised successfully, securing an amphitheatre for their prayers and activities, while Muslim students lacked a formal space to meet and practice their faith. In response, some Muslim students initiated informal gatherings. These meetings often occurred in unconventional spaces, such as the corridors of university halls of residence or makeshift outdoor areas. Adapting to their environment, students cleared spaces near trees to perform their daily prayers.⁸² This grassroots organisation laid the foundation for the establishment of JEIUB, showcasing the resilience and commitment of Muslim students to maintaining their religious practices despite campus challenges.

Similar to Benin, Togo experienced significant shifts in its foreign policy during the 1970s and 1980s. As early as the 1960s, the Togolese state facilitated the development of relationships between the local Muslim community and the broader Muslim world. A Togolese Muslim delegation visited Central Asia in the Soviet Union, including Samarkand, and a delegation of Soviet Muslims reciprocated with a visit to Togo. Representatives of the UMT also frequently contacted Cairo to secure scholarships for Togolese Muslim students and to request for graduates of Al-Azhar University to teach Arabic in Togo. The Togolese press extensively covered these exchanges.⁸³ However, following the severing of relations with Israel after the 1973 Yom Kippur War,⁸⁴ Muslims in Togo benefited from stronger ties with the Arab-Muslim world. President Eyadéma made official visits to several Middle

80 Tantawi, 'Invitation,' 3 September 1968, accessed 27 June 2024; 'Lettre d'Eyadéma au grand cheik d'El Ashar,' 19 September 1968, accessed 27 June 2024.

81 Delval 1980, 224–26.

82 M. S. Mizim'ma Toukounte and Kondor Bag'na, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

83 'Ils vont prendre contact avec...,' *Togo-Presse*, 7 October 1963; 'Lomé: une délégation du Conseil...,' *Togo-Presse*, 19 November 1969; 'Lomé: de retour de l'Union Soviétique...,' *Togo-Presse*, 21 November 1970; 'L'ambassadeur de l'URSS au Togo...,' *Togo-Presse*, 22 September 1971. See also Delval 1980, 226–38.

84 'À travers le monde et au Togo...,' *Togo-Presse*, 24 September 1973.

Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia,⁸⁵ Egypt,⁸⁶ and Kuwait.⁸⁷ This period also saw the signing of several agreements between Libya and Togo, culminating in President Eyadéma's visit to Tripoli in February 1976⁸⁸ and Libyan leader Gaddafi's reciprocal visit to Lomé in January 1977. During his visit, Gaddafi gave a lecture on Libyan political ideology at the University of Benin.⁸⁹ Shortly afterwards, Mensah, president of the AJMT and former president of the UMT (1972–76), was appointed Togo's ambassador to Libya.



Fig. 9: Centre Culturel Islamique of Lomé II, 14 May 2019, photo by the author.

This appointment ushered in a period of substantial financial and material support for the Togolese Muslim community from Libyan sources. In 1982, the WICS held a meeting in Lomé,⁹⁰ and the construction of the *Centre Culturel Islamique* (Islamic

⁸⁵ Djiwonou-Ayi, 'Après sa visite historique en Arabie...', *Togo-Presse*, 12 April 1978.

⁸⁶ 'Le général Eyadéma au président Sadate...', *Togo-Presse*, 15 June 1977.

⁸⁷ 'Le général Eyadéma en visite...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 5 January 1982.

⁸⁸ Johnson, 'Un heureux et fructueux voyage,' *Togo-Presse*, 7 February 1976.

⁸⁹ 'Brillante conférence du colonel...', *Togo-Presse*, 25 January 1977.

⁹⁰ 'Une réunion de l' Association de...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 16 December 1982.

Cultural Centre, CCI) of Lomé II began.⁹¹ The CCI, which now includes a mosque – still colloquially known as the Gaddafi Mosque –, a Franco-Arab school, a dispensary, and sports facilities, became operational in 1984, though was not officially inaugurated until 1997.⁹²

Despite the dynamism of Islam in Togo, Muslim students on campus hesitated to establish an association. Toukounte attributed this reluctance partly to the lukewarm attitude of Rector Johnson towards Muslim students and, more significantly, to their fear of political repercussions. This fear was justified by incidents in which students offered Libyan scholarships were arrested due to the unofficial channels through which funds were disbursed. Consequently, most Muslim students preferred to keep a low profile.⁹³ However, 1987 marked a turning point. Alétchérdji, then secretary-general of the AETB, began discussions with Toukounte about forming an Islamic association at UB. Leveraging his connections with the university administration, Alétchérdji secured a meeting with the new rector, Seddoh. Rector Seddoh, recognising the principle of *laïcité* at UB, expressed support for religious practice on campus. As a devout Christian, he could not oppose the creation of a Muslim association, although he voiced concerns about the international geopolitical implications. Consequently, he stipulated that the UMT leadership must endorse the initiative and appoint a mentor (*parrain*) from within UB. Nassiki Awrufo, the UMT president at the time, enthusiastically supported the proposal and selected Inoussa Bouraïma as the mentor. This choice was significant, given Bouraïma's dual role as professor of ecology and environmental sciences at UB since 1975 and his well-known affiliation with the RPT. His political commitment was further demonstrated by his subsequent positions as Minister of the Environment and Tourism in 1991 and Minister of Defence from 1992 to 1994.

In 1987, a general assembly of Muslim students on campus formally established the JEIUB, with Toukounte as its leader. Initially, the membership of Muslim women in the JEIUB was remarkably low. This limited participation was attributed not only to reticence but also to prevailing cultural misinterpretations of Islamic teachings on the role of women. Although Islam 'promotes the fulfilment of women', many parents at the time believed: 'If a girl is bold and wants to be on the same level as

91 Kankpe, 'Pose de la 1ère pierre du...,' *La Nouvelle Marche*, 20 March 1982.

92 'Le directeur général du centre...,' *Le Rendez-Vous*, 28 April 2006, 4–5; Amouzou, 'Le Centre Islamique de Lomé...,' *Togo-Presse*, 24 November 1997.

93 M. S. Mizim'ma Toukounte and Kondor Bag'na, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

men, she will have problems [...] You have been sent to school to study, it is not to do men-women business.’⁹⁴

Unlike the Christian student associations of the time, which maintained strong ties with counterparts in other West African countries and were part of larger transnational networks, the Muslim student associations in Benin and Togo operated largely in isolation from each other and from other Islamic student movements in the region. The CIUB in Benin and the JEIUB in Togo emerged as local responses to the specific challenges and opportunities faced by Muslim students on their respective campuses. Their activities primarily focused on addressing the needs of their immediate communities. However, this isolation would change significantly in the early 1990s. Both associations began to develop strong links with Muslim student groups in other countries, particularly Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire. These connections, which will be explored further in the next chapter, played a crucial role in the growth and evolution of the CIUB and JEIUB.

This chapter has traced the emergence and development of faith-based student associations on the university campuses of Lomé and Abomey-Calavi in the 1970s and 1980s. These organisations exhibited resilience in the face of political repression and social challenges, far from being mere conduits for global religious movements. In the authoritarian contexts of Togo and Benin under Presidents Eyadéma and Kérékou, Christian and Muslim students demonstrated a unique ability to balance their religious identities with the necessity of navigating the regimes’ tight controls on religious and student bodies. Their ability to maintain a distinct identity while avoiding direct confrontation with the state reveals a nuanced understanding of power dynamics and the strategic use of religious discourse for survival. By creating spaces for intellectual engagement, community building, and the articulation of alternative narratives to dominant state ideologies, these associations allowed students to pursue their visions of the good life even within authoritarian constraints. They demonstrated that the pursuit of a meaningful and fulfilling life could coexist with, and even thrive under, challenging political circumstances.

While religious groups of different denominations coexisted on campus without directly competing, mutual influences were notable. Muslim students in Togo, in particular, drew inspiration from their Christian counterparts, especially in articulating and asserting their demands to university authorities. In the early 1990s, political liberalisation, albeit timid in Togo, and the restoration of religious freedom led to significant upheaval – even violence – on both campuses. However, this did not dampen the dynamism of faith-based student associations.

94 Ibid.

4 Faith-Based Activism in an Era of Democratisation and Campuses in Turmoil (1990s)

The 1990s were a watershed decade for Benin and Togo, characterised by profound political upheavals and religious transformations. This chapter examines how these socio-political changes influenced the development of Christian and Islamic student associations on the campuses of Abomey-Calavi and Lomé. Students spearheaded protests against the one-party regimes of Kérékou and Eyadéma, leading to national conferences. During the period of socio-political liberalisation, neo-Pentecostal and evangelical movements flourished, affecting the spiritual, cultural, and political landscapes. This religious resurgence was not unconnected with the rather favourable management of religious groups on both campuses by university authorities.

The 1990s witnessed significant changes in faith-based student associations, particularly in Benin. Here, associations like the JEC could officially resume activities after operating clandestinely in the north. In both Togo and Benin, the dynamism of Christian associations and the elitism of their members often led to tensions with similar groups in parishes and churches beyond campus. Meanwhile, Muslim students from the JEIUB and CIUB, influenced by other Islamic student associations in West Africa, collaborated with high school and college students to form a broader national organisation to better promote Islam within a minority context.

Despite significant differences in political contexts, faith-based student associations in Benin and Togo operated in notably similar ways. Both countries saw these associations providing social and spiritual support amidst economic crises and the massification of university enrolment. This suggests a relative autonomy of religious dynamics from central political influences. The consistent emphasis on mediation, community support, and moral guidance indicates that, while political contexts shaped their strategies, the core mission of these associations transcended immediate political circumstances, focusing on the holistic development of their members and communities.

In the face of deteriorating living conditions on campuses in the 1990s – due primarily to underfunding of education and increasing student numbers – faith-based student associations in both countries offered crucial social and spiritual support to help new students integrate into university life. Mediation became a priority, particularly in Lomé, where hyper-politicisation, insecurity, and violence were prevalent. Muslim students aimed to counter both prejudice against Western education within the Muslim community and concerns about Islamic ‘fundamentalism’. By situating the experiences of these associations within the broader contexts of democratisation, economic crisis, and increased religiosity in the public sphere, this chapter underscores the forces that shaped their evolution.

4.1 Students Protests, National Conferences, and Religious Fervour

This section examines the political and religious transformations in Benin and Togo during the 1990s. Although both countries faced economic crises and external pressure for reform, their paths to democratisation differed. Benin transitioned peacefully from a dictatorial regime to a model democracy for West Africa. In contrast, Togo experienced a turbulent transition marked by entrenched authoritarianism, political violence, and unfulfilled democratic aspirations. Amidst liberalisation and state retrenchment, Pentecostal and evangelical movements expanded rapidly. This sociopolitical context provides insight into the flourishing of Christian student associations at the universities of Abomey-Calavi and Lomé during this period.

‘The Winds from the East are Shaking the Coconut Trees’¹

In Benin, political change resulted from a complex and uncertain dynamic, marked by the financial collapse of the state, the erosion of the Kérékou regime’s regulatory mechanisms, internal and external contestation, pressure from international donors, and polarisation around the multi-party system.² In the south, the Marxist-Leninist regime was seen as corrupt and had lost all credibility. The collapse of the Soviet bloc further weakened Benin’s position, compelling it to seek assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In 1989, Benin agreed to implement a structural adjustment programme, which involved cutting subsidies, privatising public enterprises, and reducing the size of the civil service. In January 1989, students went on strike for several months over unpaid scholarships, demanding the dissolution of the PRPB, a new constitution guaranteeing multi-party elections, a liberal economy, and the suspension of structural adjustment conditionalities. In November, unpaid civil servants and teachers threatened to strike if they did not receive their overdue salaries. Despite further promises and the gradual release of political prisoners, civilian and military discontent grew, leading to continued street protests. On 5 December 1989, the PRPB renounced its state monopoly and Marxism-Leninism as the official ideology.

Kérékou yielded to pressure and convened a Sovereign National Conference from 19 to 28 February 1990. This conference included civil society groups, reli-

¹ A quote from 17 February 1990, attributed to Omar Bongo, President of Gabon, who predicted that the upheavals in Eastern Europe would lead to unrest and democratic change in Africa.

² Banégas 1995.

gious leaders, and exiled opposition figures. Presided over by Msgr Isidore de Souza, Archbishop of Cotonou, the conference made several pivotal decisions, including the adoption of multi-party politics, the establishment of a constitutional commission and electoral office, and the appointment of Nicéphore Soglo as prime minister and head of a transitional government. A new constitution was subsequently approved by referendum.³ In the first presidential elections under the new democratic regime in March 1991, interim Prime Minister Soglo won with 67.5% of the vote against Kérékou's 32.5%. This made Kérékou the first continental African president to lose power at the ballot box. The National Conference became a model for other African countries, demonstrating how to peacefully remove a dictator and establish a democratic constitution.⁴ Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Benin emerged as a model democracy in West Africa, consistently holding elections deemed free and fair.

In Togo, like Benin, economic crisis, global changes, and external pressure compelled President Eyadéma to convene a National Conference. At the Franco-African summit in La Baule in June 1990, President François Mitterrand praised Benin as an exemplar for Africa, announcing that French aid would henceforth be contingent on liberalisation efforts. This declaration was made before 33 African delegations, including 22 heads of state.⁵ The Togolese people, aware of Kérékou's ousting in neighbouring Benin and widely reported events in Eastern Europe and Latin America, demanded similar reforms. International development agencies and Western governments grew increasingly frustrated with Eyadéma, who stubbornly refused to liberalise his regime while continuing to seek development aid.

Togo had been under pressure from the IMF and the World Bank to reform its most inefficient state-run economic sectors since the 1980s. The country's financial difficulties with creditors and donor countries worsened during the political turmoil of the 1990s. Togolese students vehemently opposed the austerity measures mandated by the SAPs. Nine students from the University of Benin, including Hilaire Dossouvi Logo (1956–2014),⁶ were arrested in August 1990 for distributing tracts against the Eyadéma regime.⁷ Their trial on 5 October 1990, for distributing the so-called '*tracts mensongers*' ('false leaflets') ignited an unprecedented student protest movement supported by opposition leaders. In 1990, at least ten 'illegal'

3 Heilbrunn 1993; Nwajiaku 1994.

4 As many as seven National Conferences took place in Francophone Africa. See Eboussi Boulaga 2009.

5 Toulabor 1995.

6 Dossouvi Logo 2004.

7 'Affaire des tracts mensongers...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 4 September 1990.

student associations were formed, three of which came together in February 1991 to present Eyadéma with a list of demands. These included a general amnesty, the dissolution of the RPT and 1980 constitution, freedom of the press, the creation of autonomous associations, political parties and trade unions, and a national conference followed by free elections.⁸

Clashes between the population and security forces in April and May 1991, followed by a general strike on 6 June, compelled Eyadéma to agree to a national conference, which was held between 8 July and 26 August 1991. The delegates elected a nine-month transitional *Haut Conseil de la République* (High Council of the Republic, HCR) to serve as a legislative body and appointed Joseph Kokou Koffigoh as interim prime minister. The HCR, chaired by Philippe Fanoko Kossi Kpodzro, the Archbishop of Lomé, was tasked with ratifying a new constitution to pave the way for multi-party elections. However, Koffigoh was abducted by the military in an attempted coup in December 1991. The HCR subsequently agreed to form a government of national unity with the RPT, allowing Eyadéma to stand in the 1993 presidential election.

Benefiting from France's policy of non-intervention, Eyadéma utilised his loyal northern army to terrorise society into submission, regaining power in 1993. This period was characterised by a crippling 18-month strike (from November 1992 to August 1993) organised by the *Collectif de l'Opposition Démocratique II* (Collective of the Democratic Opposition, COD II), which caused a third of Lomé's population to flee to Ghana,⁹ and by riots and social unrest in the south. Amidst bloody coups, divisions within the opposition, redistricting, and the revision of electoral lists, Eyadéma maintained power with tacit support from France. He won the presidential election in 1993, which was boycotted by the main opposition candidates,¹⁰ and secured victories again in 1998 and 2003, each time through military force, corruption, and electoral irregularities.¹¹ Although the democratic transition remained stalled and the population grew disillusioned with the authoritarian restoration,¹² two democratic achievements were realised in the early 1990s: the establishment of a multi-party system and the liberalisation of the media.¹³

Liberalisation in Benin and Togo extended beyond the political and economic realms, profoundly impacting the religious landscape. This newfound freedom not

⁸ 'Le chef de l'Etat a reçu le...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 20 March 1991.

⁹ Gervais-Lambony 1994.

¹⁰ von Trotha 1993.

¹¹ Heilbrunn 1993; 1996; Iwata 2000; Macé 2004; Rambaud 2006.

¹² Toulabor 1996b.

¹³ For an in-depth comparative study of the democratisation process and transition in Benin and Togo, see Houngnikpo 2001; Seely 2009.

only diversified religious affiliations but also increased the public presence of religion, reaching even the highest levels of the state in Benin.

'Prions pour le Togo,' 'Dieu aime le Bénin': Religious Freedom and Expansion of Pentecostal-ism

Far from being an isolated phenomenon, the religious resurgence on the campuses of Lomé and Abomey-Calavi in the 1990s was reflective of broader societal trends in Togo and Benin. Toulabor noted, 'never have we prayed that much in Togo'¹⁴ following the National Conference. Various religious activities, such as novenas, fasts, pilgrimages, a national week of prayer and thanksgiving for democratic renewal,¹⁵ and a prayer and fasting march to 'exorcise the demon of violence',¹⁶ were organised in support of democratisation. The 1990 relaxation of the law banning religious sects culminated in its official abolition with the proclamation of freedom of religion in 1992. Pentecostal denominations proliferated rapidly, influenced by neighbouring Ghana and Nigeria.¹⁷ The swift rise of Radio Évangile, the first Pentecostal radio station launched by the Assemblies of God in 1995, turned some pastors into celebrities.¹⁸ Evangelistic campaigns of miracles and healing in Lomé by the American evangelist Morris Cerrullo in 1992 and 1997,¹⁹ and by the renowned German missionary Reinhard Bonnke in 1991, highlighted Pentecostalism's growing popularity. Bonnke, who had also visited Togo in 1985,²⁰ drew massive crowds, received significant media attention,²¹ and was granted an audience with President Eyadéma.²²

As Piot has emphasised, 'It would be hard to overestimate the significance of the new Pentecostal churches in the post-Cold War cultural life of Ghana and Togo, especially among the middle classes in the capital cities.'²³ He has argued that the

14 Toulabor 1997, 228.

15 Amouzou, 'Semaine de prières pour le renouveau...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 21 September 1991; Souley-Nyaw and Aguiar, 'Fin de la semaine de prières...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 23 September 1991.

16 Fiwumo-Dotsey, 'Marche de prière et de jeûne...', *Togo-Presse*, 30 January 1992.

17 Fancello 2005.

18 Noret 2004, 84–87.

19 Adjignon, 'Croisade de miracle à Lomé...', *Togo-Presse*, 14 December 1992; Tchangai, 'Morris Cerrullo en campagne...', *Togo-Presse*, 21 August 1997.

20 'Trois audiences hier au Palais...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 16 February 1985.

21 Aguiar, 'Grande campagne d'évangélisation...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 18 February 1991; 'Mardi dernier au bord de...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 21 February 1991; Gbete, 'Plusieurs milliers de togolais...', *Forum Hebdo*, 22 February, 1991.

22 Amana, 'Audience présidentielle: le pasteur...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 26 February 1991.

23 Piot 2010, 53–54.

retreat of the Togolese state from public service provision and the liberalisation of the economy and public sphere fundamentally transformed Togo's cultural and political landscape. This shift empowered non-state actors, especially NGOs and Pentecostal churches, to fill the void left by the state. Pentecostal churches like the Assemblies of God, Church of the Pentecost, and Winner's Chapel have proliferated nationwide, offering strict moral codes, promises of worldly success, and End Times narratives. These institutions have evolved into powerful cultural and political forces, promoting a neoliberal subjectivity that emphasises individual responsibility and empowerment. Unlike earlier mission churches in Togo, they are intolerant of local religious practices, viewing spirits and ancestors as local 'demons' and attributing many of Africa's problems, particularly underdevelopment, to these beliefs.²⁴

As in Togo, religious freedom in Benin was restored and guaranteed following the National Conference. The 1990 constitution not only declares the state's secular nature, but also asserts that 'everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and worship [...] in accordance with the public order established by law and regulations. The exercise of worship and the expression of beliefs shall be carried out in accordance with the secular nature of the State.'²⁵ This democratisation process was accompanied by a resurgence of religiosity in the public sphere, epitomised by the popular phrase '*Dieu aime le Bénin*' ('God loves Benin'), which attributes the success of Benin's peaceful transition to divine intervention or blessing.

The Catholic Church regained political influence from the early 1990s. Before this period, the Church had remained relatively quiet, despite issuing critical pastoral letters during the revolutionary regime's final years. The charismatic Archbishop of Cotonou, Msgr de Souza, emerged as a pivotal figure, initially as president of the National Conference and later as head of the High Council of the Republic until its transformation into the Constitutional Court in 1993.²⁶ The Catholic Church, along with other Christian denominations, organised public marches and collective prayers in support of peaceful elections. Early pastoral letters in the 1990s demonstrated political engagement, notably in 1995, when the Church called for strong but peaceful citizen participation in the democratisation process.²⁷

However, the dominant role of the Catholic Church was increasingly challenged by the growing prominence of evangelical churches, which, although still a

²⁴ Piot 2010; 2012.

²⁵ 'Constitution de la République du Bénin,' accessed 31 May 2023.

²⁶ Mensah 2011.

²⁷ Strandsbjerg 2015, 71.

minority, became highly visible. Liberalisation spurred the remarkable growth of Christian churches and facilitated the arrival of foreign churches, primarily from Nigeria and Ghana, which could now operate in Benin without fear of repression. Cotonou became the epicentre of Pentecostal activity in the country, hosting frequent crusades, evangelistic campaigns, training seminars, and other events.²⁸ Mayrargue has argued that the prosperity gospel has resonated with many Beninese who, amid political uncertainty and socio-economic crisis, seek solutions and support for their daily struggles, as well as a sense of purpose and identity. The rise of Pentecostalism mirrors the process of individualisation.²⁹

Consequently, Benin's evangelical and Pentecostal community now consists of numerous competing churches, varying significantly in size, dynamism, origin, and doctrinal orientation. The unity of the *Conseil Interconfessionnel Protestant du Bénin* (CIPB) – a single structure established during the revolutionary regime – has fractured. A new organisation, the *Fédération des Églises et Missions Évangéliques du Bénin* (Federation of Evangelical Churches and Missions of Benin, FEMEB), has emerged around the Assemblies of God. Meanwhile, in 1993, the CIPB became the *Conseil des Églises Protestantes Évangéliques du Bénin* (Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Benin, CEPEB), which later launched Maranatha Evangelical Radio in 1998.³⁰

While President Soglo was widely perceived as a promoter of Vodun, particularly for his role in organising the Ouidah 92 festival – the first global celebration of Vodun arts and cultures – and establishing a national Vodun holiday (10 January), his motivations were more complex, rooted in both economic and political strategies.³¹ In contrast, Kérékou's return to power in 1996 marked a significant rise in the political influence of evangelical Christians. After spending several years on the political sidelines, Kérékou re-emerged, presenting himself as a transformed man: a democrat and a born-again Christian. His frequent use of biblical quotations in his speeches and his new religious identity significantly enhanced his appeal among Christian voters.³² During Kérékou's two terms in office (1996–2006), several evangelical figures held key political positions, including ministerial roles, leadership of public enterprises, and ambassadorial posts.³³ Despite this, in the 1996

28 de Surgy 2001; Mayrargue 2008.

29 Mayrargue 2001.

30 Mayrargue 2005, 252–56.

31 Tall 1995; Mayrargue 1997.

32 Mayrargue 1996; Strandsbjerg 2005a; 2005b.

33 Mayrargue 2005; 2007.

presidential and parliamentary elections, regional affiliation and Soglo's economic and social record were more influential on voter behaviour than religion.³⁴

The 1990s marked a significant turning point in the sociopolitical landscapes of Benin and Togo. Both countries faced economic crises, external pressures for reform, and demands for democratisation. However, their paths diverged: Benin achieved a relatively peaceful transition to a multi-party democracy, while Togo's democratic aspirations remained largely unfulfilled as Eyadéma maintained his grip on power. Despite these differences, both countries witnessed a notable resurgence of religiosity in the public sphere, characterised by the expansion of Pentecostal and evangelical movements, the growing influence of the Catholic Church, and the diversification of religious affiliations. In societies increasingly marked by the proliferation of Christian churches and 'sects' from Nigeria and Ghana – frequently reported upon in the press³⁵ – the favourable arrangements for the expression of religiosity granted by university authorities at Abomey-Calavi and Lomé were widely accepted by the campus communities at the time.

This religious fervour permeated university campuses, where faith-based student associations thrived amidst newfound religious freedom and supportive arrangements from university authorities. The proliferation of religious organisations in the 1990s marked a significant departure from the stringent state control over religion that characterised the authoritarian regimes of the 1970s and 1980s. The implementation of SAPs and the resulting economic liberalisation further reshaped the landscape, reducing the state's capacity to regulate various societal aspects, including religion. The following sections will delve into the specific experiences and strategies of these faith-based student associations as they navigated the interplay of religion, politics, and campus life in the 1990s. This exploration occurs within the context of a shifting political economy and the loosening of state control over religious activities.

³⁴ Mayrargue 1996, 130.

³⁵ Baneto, 'Prolifération des églises chrétiennes...', *Togo-Presse*, 30 September 1994; Towanou, 'Escroquerie: quand la religion...', *La Nation*, 5 September 1995; Tapsoba, 'Où va l'argent des sectes...', *Forum Hebdo*, 22 September 1995; Jules, 'Dossier complet sur les sectes...', *L'éveil du Peuple*, 3 November 1995; Blaise, 'Les sectes du Togo...', *Carrefour*, 28 August 1997; Laurent, 'Comprendre le regain d'intérêt...', *L'éveil du Peuple*, 23 November 1998.

4.2 Tensions between Christian Student Associations, Parishes, and Churches

This section examines the development of the JEC and Bible groups in the 1990s, highlighting their strategies to navigate the evolving campus environment, their engagement with broader socio-religious dynamics, and their impact on university life and larger Christian communities. During this decade, JEC chapters on the campuses of Lomé and Abomey-Calavi sought to assert autonomy from their diocesan counterparts. In Lomé, university students aimed to establish a distinct religious and intellectual space separate from secondary school students. Meanwhile, in Benin, JEC experienced a revival in the south following the country's political liberalisation, spearheaded by *Jécistes* from the north. Bible groups in Benin also underwent a revival following the reauthorisation of religious activities at educational institutions, creating tensions with local churches due to their approach to biblical study and activism.

The Elitism of the JEC-U and its Tug-of-War with the JEC in the Parishes of Lomé

Under the leadership of a new cohort of JEC students who arrived on campus in Lomé in the early 1990s, the JEC-U underwent significant changes. Among these young leaders were Théophile Tonyeme, Sabin Sonhaye, Blaise Pagmiou, and Vivianne Togbi. While Tonyeme, Sonhaye, and Pagmiou began their JEC activism as high school and college students in various cities across Togo, Togbi attended JEC in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, in the late 1980s.³⁶ Although some students were new to JEC upon their arrival, most had been actively involved in JEC activities before joining UB, leading to a sense of familiarity among them.³⁷ As Sonhaye noted, these former JEC schoolmates, hailing from different parts of Togo and accustomed to only seeing each other at national camps, all converged at the university: 'All the young people of the same generation, at the same time, met here on this campus. [...] So it was like a national meeting, but for one year, two years, five years. [...] We will be able to build something interesting.'³⁸

JEC-U was considered a chapter of the diocesan JEC of Lomé. However, some *Jécistes* from UB aimed to establish it as an autonomous organisation. According to Tonyeme, this aspiration stemmed from two observations: firstly, the differing

³⁶ Vivianne Togbi, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 27 August 2021.

³⁷ Théophile Tonyeme, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 7 September 2021.

³⁸ Sabin Sonhaye, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

needs of secondary school and university students, and secondly, the presence of university students in diocesan JEC activities hindered the personal development of secondary school students.³⁹ Sonhaye concurred, highlighting that the JEC-U possessed ‘a certain singularity’ because, as university students, ‘we don’t have the same facts of life. We won’t have the same way of seeing, judging and acting. [...] We have to do something special to fulfil ourselves.’⁴⁰ This push for autonomy was also influenced by the 1991 IYCS World Congress decision allowing university chapters to become independent entities. Consequently, during the first JEC university camp in Togoville in 1992, the *Jécistes* resolved to become an autonomous entity affiliated with the IYCS.⁴¹ The following year, JEC-U organised a pan-African meeting of university JECs in Lomé.⁴² However, Pagmiou noted that this initiative was poorly received by the national office of Togo JEC, who perceived it as an attempt by JEC-U leaders to supplant them.⁴³

The university students’ desire to distinguish themselves from the parishes was evident in the numerous activities organised by JEC-U in the 1990s. Besides campus masses, the *Jécistes* conducted their own Stations of the Cross for the university community during Easter. They also organised a Marian pilgrimage to Togoville⁴⁴ for university students, staff, faculty, cadres, and ‘intellectuals’ in Lomé, featuring speakers on topics of a ‘higher level’ than those arranged by the archdiocese.⁴⁵ As Sonhaye explained, JEC-U members cultivated a certain elitism, strongly encouraged by the university chaplain: ‘Agbobli put something in our heads. He said the campus is not a parish, it is the university chaplaincy. It has to think differently.’⁴⁶ The chaplain, who was still a professor of history at UB, tailored his homilies for an academic audience: ‘If you are not a university student and you come to mass here in the Amphi 600, Agbobli looks at you like this and asks you: what are you looking for? [...] The parish will be at your level. Don’t come here.’⁴⁷ With Agbobli’s support, the JEC-U also managed to persuade Msgr Kpodzro to grant them a voice alongside the Archdiocese of Lomé in meetings with the Bishops’ Conference of Togo.

39 Théophile Tonyeme, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 7 September 2021.

40 Sabin Sonhaye, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

41 Modeste Lemon, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 November 2022.

42 Vivianne Togbi, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 27 August 2021.

43 Blaise Pagmiou, in conversation with the author, Zoom call, 9 November 2021.

44 In 1973, the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared on a boat in the middle of Lake Togo. Since then, every first Sunday after All Saints’ Day, some Catholics make a pilgrimage to Togoville to celebrate the ‘Lady of the Lake’, the ‘Mother of Mercy’.

45 Sabin Sonhaye, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

The dynamism of the JEC-U caused friction with the JEC in the parishes of Lomé. Following the socio-political unrest of the early 1990s – marked by student strikes, the closure of secondary schools, colleges, and the university, and the general strike of 1992–93 – the involvement of the JEC in the schools and colleges of Lomé significantly diminished. When classes resumed, many school officials were hostile or suspicious of youth organisations that had been instrumental in the strikes. To revive the movement, some *Jécistes* considered shifting their activities to parishes, where they could continue to meet. Consequently, some *Jécistes* remained involved in parishes rather than joining the JEC-U when they arrived on campus. For instance, Komi F. Djeguema continued as a *Jéciste* of the Archdiocese of Lomé during his time at UB before being appointed national coordinator of the JEC in 1999.⁴⁸ He noted their effective recruitment strategy in the parishes, which included promoting activities at masses, making courtesy visits to reluctant parents, and organising outings to the beach. Despite initial concerns from the Catholic hierarchy, who deemed these outings ‘too festive’ in a ‘place of debauchery,’ they became an annual tradition that significantly attracted young people.⁴⁹ However, JEC-U activists teased university students who returned to their parishes on Sundays, participating in activities not suited to their level: ‘Do you want to be children forever or do you want to grow? If you want to grow, come to the JEC-U.’⁵⁰

In the 1990s, JEC-U had about fifty highly active members, though there were barely five women, despite Vivianne Togbi being elected as the first JEC-U leader in 1992. She noted that girls were reluctant to join student groups due to the tense socio-political context.⁵¹ Catholic students, whether *Jécistes* or not, who attended mass on campus initially met in the *Village du Bénin*, then moved to *Cité A*, the *Grand Amphi*, the *Amphi 20 ans*, and finally the *Amphi 600* as these spaces became too small.⁵² With the support of Pierre Radji, a JEC-U pioneer who became a professor at the university in 1991, and Professor Maryse Quashie,⁵³ they persuaded Rector Seddoh to authorise the construction of the *Centre Catholique Universitaire*

48 Komi F. Djeguema, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 26 August 2021.

49 Ibid.

50 Sabin Sonhayé, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

51 Vivianne Togbi, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 27 August 2021.

52 Sabin Sonhayé, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

53 Maryse Quashie, then a professor of education at the University of Lomé, is a well-known figure in both academia and civil society. Quashie is a founding member of the *Ligue Togolaise des Droits de l'Homme* (Togolese League for Human Rights, LTDH) and participated in the National Conference as a member of the presidium. She regularly takes part in socio-political debates in Togo. See, for example, Ayetan, ‘Au Togo, Maryse Quashie...,’ *La Croix Africa*, 28 June 2019.

(Catholic University Centre, CCU) on campus.⁵⁴ Built around 1996, the CCU now includes a chapel and a conference room, providing a space for masses and other JEC-U activities.



Fig. 10: Centre Catholique Universitaire, 11 November 2022, photo by the author.

While the JEC in Togo faced tensions between its university and parish chapters, a similar situation unfolded in Benin, though with notable differences. In Togo, the friction arose primarily from JEC-U's quest for autonomy and perceived elitism. In contrast, the JEC in Benin experienced a 'resurrection' in the southern part of the country, with the movement expanding from parishes to educational institutions. Despite these differences, both countries saw a dynamic interplay between JEC chapters in parishes and those in schools and universities during the 1990s.

⁵⁴ Pierre Radji, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 30 August 2021.

The ‘Resurrection’ of the JEC in Southern Benin: From Parishes to Educational Institutions

As previously discussed, the JEC managed to survive clandestinely during the revolutionary period in a few parishes in northern Benin, particularly in the dioceses of Parakou and Natitingou. In the early 1990s, following the country’s social and political liberalisation, the JEC, whose activities had been entirely suspended, was revived in southern Benin. This revival was facilitated by some *Jécistes* from the north who had passed the *baccalauréat* and moved to Cotonou for higher education.⁵⁵ Among the key figures were Pacôme Elet and Gildas Agonkan, former clandestine JEC members in Parakou, along with Gustave Djedatin and Auxence Vivien Hounkpe. Upon arriving in Cotonou, these students recognised the importance of their JEC experiences and established new JEC groups within the parishes where they attended Sunday mass.

Many *Jécistes* from the north attended mass at the Bon Pasteur parish in Cad-jèhoun, led by Father Jacob Agossou (1939–2018).⁵⁶ Agossou, who held doctorates in theology and philosophy, was the first African Eudist priest and the founder of the Université Catholique d’Afrique de l’Ouest (Catholic University of West Africa) in Cotonou. Known for his eloquence in both French and Fongbè,⁵⁷ Benin’s most widely spoken national language, Agossou significantly contributed to developing a JEC chapter in this parish during the 1990s. The *Jécistes* also received support from two Eudist deacons from Atrokpocodji, Honoré Kouassi from Côte d’Ivoire and Raphaël Drabo from Burkina Faso, both of whom had been active in JEC in Côte d’Ivoire in the 1980s. They oversaw the parishes of Bon Pasteur and Sainte-Thérèse de l’Enfant Jésus in Godomey, the latter being near the Abomey-Calavi campus. The Archbishop of Cotonou, Isidore de Souza, appointed Kouassi and Drabo as JEC chaplains.⁵⁸

According to Djedatin, who was elected president of the JEC of the Archdiocese of Cotonou, their goal was to establish JEC chapters in parishes and then gradually extend them to schools. They set up approximately ten parish chapters, with the Zogbo parish being particularly dynamic. The first educational institutions where JEC was established were the private Catholic College of Père Aupiais and the Cours secondaire Notre-Dame des Apôtres. From these schools, a JEC chapter was estab-

55 Pacôme Elet, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

56 Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.

57 Bossa, ‘Bénin: Jacob Médéwalé...’, *La Nouvelle Tribune*, 10 October 2018; Sarr and Hlannon, ‘Homage au père Jacob Agossou...’, *La Croix Africa*, 25 October 2018.

58 Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 11 March 2022.

lished in the nearby CEG Gbégamey. Establishing JEC chapters in schools posed challenges, as many principals feared these groups might evolve into union movements. However, they managed to earn the trust of several headmasters by actively combating cheating, conducting sanitation activities, and offering tutoring.⁵⁹ While serving in the Zogbo parish, *Jécistes* established JECs in both CEG Zogbo and CEG Védoko. The parish played a pivotal role in founding these school chapters, with members engaging with students and leading JEC activities throughout the week.⁶⁰ This initiative soon extended to other parishes, such as Sainte-Thérèse in Akpakpa, Cotonou,⁶¹ highlighting the parish's role as a vital support structure for expanding the JEC into educational institutions.

Djedatin's team organised the first-ever JEC national camp in Benin in 1993 at the Père Aupiais College, which significantly increased membership and marked the association's rebirth.⁶² One of the camp's most significant achievements, according to Djedatin, was breaking down ethnic and geographical barriers through cultural and interregional exchanges. The camp attracted over 300 participants, including large delegations from Parakou and Natitingou, an ambitious undertaking given the political tensions between the north and south. For many southern Beninese, Kérékou's revolutionary regime was perceived as dominated by northerners. There were also concerns about the interaction between groups of different socio-economic backgrounds. Students from Cotonou, often referred to as children of wealthy families (*‘fils et filles à papa’*), had very different upbringings from their less privileged northern counterparts. The north was less affluent than the south, leading to stereotypes: southern students viewed their northern peers as rural or, pejoratively, as *‘gambalinu’*, a term associated with ‘savages’, while northerners saw southerners as spoiled and decadent. The first few days of the camp were tense, including an argument between chaplains from the north and south over alleged derogatory remarks. Despite these challenges, barriers began to crumble during the 10-day event. Djedatin recalls this experience as one of the most memorable of his time in the JEC, demonstrating that despite regional, economic, and cultural differences, common ground and friendships could be forged.⁶³

The *Jécistes* also established a JEC chapter on the Abomey-Calavi campus and gained official recognition from university authorities.⁶⁴ At the time, the Emmaüs

59 Ibid.

60 Clotire Deguenon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

61 Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 27 February 2022.

62 Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.

63 Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 11 March 2022.

64 Emile Eteka, Elvis Vitoule and Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

community was the most prominent Catholic organisation on campus.⁶⁵ The administration was very receptive, providing the JEC and other religious groups with an ecumenical room widely used for meetings and various activities.⁶⁶ By the late 1990s, the JEC was actively involved in both religious and social activism on campus. Clotaire Deguenon, who arrived at UAC in 1996, highlighted the JEC's initiatives, which included awareness campaigns on critical issues such as HIV/AIDS prevention and anti-corruption measures in the academic environment. These were significant challenges at the time. Additionally, the JEC prioritised the spiritual growth of its members through retreats, pilgrimages, and other faith-based activities that reinforced their religious beliefs and strengthened community bonds. Support from the university administration, such as the provision of transport for pilgrimages by the *Centre National des Œuvres Universitaires* (National Centre for University Services, CENOU), underscored the recognition and approval of these activities and their importance within the campus community. The core group, consisting of about 30 students, drove the organisation's initiatives and ensured its continuity. However, the JEC's reach extended beyond this core group, especially during major events. Pilgrimages, for instance, could attract up to 100 participants, filling two university buses. Similarly, JEC conferences were attended not only by members but also by other interested individuals through the association's outreach efforts.⁶⁷ The JEC also fought harassment, abortion, cheating, and environmental issues.⁶⁸

On campus, the JEC benefited from the support of Professor Albert Tévoédjrè, a former *Jéciste*,⁶⁹ and Bernard de Clairvaux Toha Wontacien⁷⁰ of the Emmaüs University Chaplaincy.⁷¹ The latter, who had been involved in various Catholic action movements, including the JEC (1983–87), held roles in spiritual affairs (1993–95) and served as president (1996–97) of Emmaüs while studying geology at UNB.⁷² The *Jécistes* also counted on the support of Professor Jean Pliya (1931–2015), a former JEC leader during his studies at the University of Toulouse in the 1950s.⁷³ An internationally renowned Beninese writer and playwright, Pliya was a deputy and minister in the 1960s and served as Rector of the National University of Benin from

65 Pacôme Sevo, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 15 March 2022.

66 Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 11 March 2022.

67 Clotaire Deguenon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

68 Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 27 February 2022.

69 Clotaire Deguenon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

70 He has been the bishop of Djougou since 2022.

71 Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 11 March 2022.

72 'Bernard de Clairvaux Toha Wontacien...', *Fraternité*, 8 April 2022.

73 Foster 2015.

1981 to 1983. From 1983 until his return to Benin in 1991, he taught geography at the University of Niamey, Niger. Influenced by charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity, he became the national leader of the *Renouveau Charismatique Catholique* (Catholic Charismatic Renewal) for over twenty years. Pliya authored several prayer anthologies and actively participated in the inculturation movement, which seeks to localise Catholic liturgical practices. He played a pivotal role in promoting the Charismatic Renewal within intellectual circles.⁷⁴

Similar to the JEC in Togo, the environment within the Beninese JEC fostered a culture of seriousness and regular attendance among its members, leading to improved academic performance. Pacôme Sevoh, who served as the JEC's campus coordinator for the 1998–99 academic year, noted that the group consisted of young people who excelled academically. This success bolstered the movement's credibility and reassured parents, making them more comfortable entrusting their children, especially young adolescent girls, to the JEC. This experience highlighted the importance of academic excellence in gaining parental support and cultivating a sense of elitism within the JEC.⁷⁵ However, as with the JEC in Togo, tensions developed between the JEC in educational institutions and the JEC in parishes. From 1996 onwards, some JEC leaders advocated for transferring all parish branches to schools and universities: 'The JEC is a Catholic action movement. What can we transform in parishes? But we can bring our Christian faith into the educational environment to raise awareness among our classmates.'⁷⁶ Ultimately, the JEC leaders decided against this move, allowing *Jécistes* the freedom to meet in parishes. This decision helped maintain student involvement in the JEC, as many had college or university schedules that conflicted with weekly meetings.⁷⁷ This situation began to change in the early 2000s when a significant group of Beninese students returned from Côte d'Ivoire, where the JEC had been particularly dynamic. Their return revitalised the university JEC.⁷⁸

While the JEC was experiencing a revival and navigating tensions between its parish and educational institution chapters, a similar dynamic was unfolding within the Protestant student movement. The GBEEB, which had been in a state of lethargy, underwent a resurgence following the end of the ban on religious activities in educational institutions. This 'crossing of the Red Sea', as it was referred to in the association's memory, saw the GBEEB establish a strong presence on campus.

74 Mayrargue 2007, 304–05.

75 Pacôme Sevoh, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 15 March 2022.

76 Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.

77 Ibid.

78 Pacôme Sevoh, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 15 March 2022.

Bible Groups at the UNB and the UB: Training an Evangelical Elite

Augustin Ahoga and Jacob Djossou, pioneers of the GBEEB in the 1980s, significantly contributed to the organisation's revival. Ahoga, returning from theological studies in Vaux-sur-Seine, served as secretary general from 1989 to 1999. Under his leadership, and with the assistance of his wife, the association organised numerous training camps and seminars across various regions of Benin. The biennial national camp was reinstated in 1994, with the fourth edition held in Dassa.⁷⁹ Djossou, on the other hand, left his teaching career in 1992 to dedicate himself to the GBEEB and specifically to the *Amis du GBEEB* (Friends of the GBEEB). He was motivated by his personal transformation: 'When I saw what God had done in my own life, I had to do something so that many pupils and students could leave the path of debauchery and embark on the true path.' The objective was to enable GBEEB alumni to better support the students. Djossou succeeded Ahoga as secretary general in 1999.⁸⁰

At the UNB, following official recognition in 1992,⁸¹ GBEEB leaders aimed to maintain amicable relations with university authorities. They adopted a non-militant approach, avoiding open demonstrations typical of other student movements on campus. The appointment of the president of the National Board of Trustees of the Friends of the GBEEB as the *Directeur Administratif et Financier* (Administrative and Financial Director, DAF) of the UNB in the early 1990s facilitated their interactions with the rectorate. Although they secured an agreement in principle to construct the GBU headquarters on campus, the university ultimately refused the request after other religious groups demanded similar provisions.⁸²

Despite this setback, the *Centre des Œuvres Universitaires et Sociales* (University and Social Services Centre, COUS) supported religious groups, including the GBU, even providing a subsidy of 500,000 CFA francs from the campus activities budget.⁸³ During this period, the COUS actively encouraged religious groups to organise cultural and spiritual events during the 'Students' week'. For instance, the GBEEB had access to classrooms for lectures and film screenings and could organise concerts on campus.⁸⁴ GBEEB members were divided into several groups based on their availability and field of study, with Bible studies conducted almost daily, either at lunchtime or in the evening, across various locations.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

⁸⁰ Jacob Djossou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 19 March 2022.

⁸¹ 'Le GBEEB, un mouvement en mission,' accessed 13 February 2020.

⁸² Jacob Djossou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 19 March 2022.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Similar to the JEC, the elitism promoted by the GBEEB caused tensions with many churches. Ahoga noted that the numerous evangelical leaders trained by the GBEEB led him to assert, ‘The GBU has been an instrument in God’s hand to populate the evangelical churches in Benin. If we take away the GBU, the evangelical churches would be filled with semi-literate and illiterate people.’⁸⁶ The GBEEB fostered a certain elitism, even at the high school level. As the secretary of the GBEEB from 2009 to 2021 recounted, he discovered the association as a student in Parakou. He attended a meeting at his college at the invitation of a classmate:

There were no teachers there. [...] I was placed in a small group of five or six students for Bible study. [...] They handled the Word of God very well and spoke good French. I was in *classe de seconde*, but I couldn’t form sentences properly. [...] I thought, ‘Wow, here’s a very interesting group of young people who talk about God and are eloquent. I need to be part of this group.’ So that’s how I’ve been involved with the GBEEB since 93.⁸⁷

According to another activist from the 1990s, many evangelical churches viewed the GBEEB as a rival movement.⁸⁸ The ‘Observation-Interpretation and Application’ (OIA) method of Bible study used by the GBEEB trained congregants to critically evaluate pastors’ teachings. The GBEEB endeavoured to explain to the churches that their organisation supported Christian students on campus, helping them navigate the unique challenges of living and sharing their faith. The association perceives itself as an outreach arm of the churches on campus, collaborating with them to train and support Christian students. In doing so, the GBEEB contributes to the evangelisation of the university community and the growth of the church. It was crucial to convey to churches and pastors that they had a vested interest in supporting the GBEEB, as its members were future leaders and contributors. Moreover, traditional street evangelism with loudspeakers would not appeal to intellectuals, according to Ahoga.⁸⁹

In Togo, the GBUST maintained its activities, with some even featured in the national press. For instance, in December 1993, it organised a national seminar in Kpalimé for university and school Bible groups across the country. The seminar aimed to ‘start afresh, being more active and committed to the work of evangelisation’ and participants were trained to lead Bible studies.⁹⁰ In April 1994, the *Groupe Biblique Universitaire de Lomé* (University Bible Group of Lomé, GBUL) held

⁸⁶ Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

⁸⁷ Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

⁹⁰ ‘Les groupes bibliques universitaires...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 29 December 1993.

a week of evangelisation during the annual celebration of the International Day of the Student, initiated by the IFES. The theme, 'Hope in despair', expressed young Christian students' faith amid global crises.⁹¹

The elitism and tensions between campus-based and parish/church-based religious associations provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of religious authority and identity formation among students in the 1990s. The rise of elite campus-based religious associations, such as the JEC-U in Togo and the GBU in Benin, signalled a growing desire among university students to create a distinct religious and intellectual space that catered to their specific needs and aspirations. These associations emphasised a more intellectually rigorous and critical approach to faith, illustrated by the JEC-U's focus on 'higher level' topics and the GBEEB's use of the 'Observation-Interpretation and Application' method of Bible study. This elitism was further bolstered by the support of university chaplains and professors, who encouraged students to develop a different way of thinking and engaging with religion compared to parish and church-based groups. The tensions between campus-based and parish/church-based associations highlighted a contestation of religious authority and a shift in the locus of religious identity formation. For university students, the campus became a primary site for exploring and asserting their religious identity, often in ways that challenged or diverged from the established norms and practices of parish/church-based groups. The desire for autonomy and the assertion of a distinct religious identity among university students can be seen as part of a broader process of individuation and self-discovery characteristic of the university experience.

4.3 JEIUB and CIUB in the Era of 'AEMisation': Bringing Together Western-Educated Pupils and Students

The 1990s marked a transformative era for Muslim student associations on the campuses of Lomé and Abomey-Calavi. During this period, the JEIUB and CIUB not only gained unprecedented visibility and influence but also became central hubs for broader Islamic activism. This surge coincided with the establishment of significant partnerships with transnational Islamic NGOs in Togo and Benin. These developments culminated in the formation of the *Association des Élèves et Étudiants Musulmans au Togo* (AEEMT) and the *Association Culturelle des Étudiants et Élèves Musulmans du Bénin* (ACEEMUB), which unified Muslim student groups across various educational institutions. This section examines the strategies that propelled this metamorphosis.

91 Oboubé, 'Semaine de l'étudiant: campagne...', *Togo-Presse*, 20 April 1994.

From the JEIUB to the *Association des Élèves et Étudiants Musulmans au Togo* (AEEMT)

When Kondor Bag'na arrived on campus during the 1990–91 academic year, he encountered the general secretary of JEIUB, who was frustrated with the lack of mobilisation among Muslim students and contemplating resignation. Bag'na, however, persuaded him to complete his term, promising to succeed him.⁹² Under Bag'na's leadership, JEIUB experienced unprecedented dynamism. Increasing numbers of students began openly expressing their faith and wearing Islamic attire on campus.⁹³ One notable event was the 'Welima⁹⁴ 94' celebration organised by JEIUB, which attracted coverage from the newspaper *Togo-Presse* in 1994. Fourteen students who had completed their Qur'anic studies received diplomas, and two conferences were held: 'The Importance of Reading the Qur'an' and 'Women and Islam'. JEIUB's growing influence was evident as prominent figures attended the ceremony. These included Imam Ahmed Limiou of the Central Mosque of Lomé, representatives of the UMT, the Africa Muslims Agency (AMA), the *Comité International pour l'Expansion des Rites de l'Islam* (International Committee for the Expansion of the Rites of Islam, CIERI), and the *Centre Culturel Islamique* (Islamic Cultural Centre) of Lomé II.⁹⁵

The growing popularity of JEIUB's activities even alarmed Bag'na and other group leaders. As Bag'na recalled, 'we were afraid, because we were being courted from all sides, with people offering us honours and favours.'⁹⁶ With political liberalisation, an increasing number of transnational Islamic NGOs began operating more actively in Togo. The AMA, informally present since 1987, received official recognition in 1993.⁹⁷ Between 1987 and 2000, AMA constructed 75 mosques, 127 wells, three health centres, and five socio-educational centres in Togo.⁹⁸ Additionally, the WAMY,⁹⁹ active in Togo since 1989, organised numerous Islamic training seminars and activities for youth, imams, and preachers across various cities.¹⁰⁰ Another

92 M. S. Mizim'ma Toukounte and Kondor Bag'na, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

93 Kondor Bag'na and Yaya Assadou Kolani, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 August 2021.

94 This word means to gather or meet in Arabic and refers to a celebration.

95 N'Bouke, 'Jeunesse Etudiantine Islamique...', *Togo-Presse*, 4 August 1994.

96 M. S. Mizim'ma Toukounte and Kondor Bag'na, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

97 Kezie, 'Togo-Koweit: Lomé signe...', *Togo-Presse*, 27 December 1993.

98 ATOP, 'Le quartier d'Agoè-Gbonvè doté...', *Togo-Presse*, 9 February 2000.

99 Schulze 2022.

100 Adom, 'Séminaire national des jeunes prédicateurs...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 1 August 1990; 'Ouverture à Tchamba d'un séminaire...', *Togo-Presse*, 30 March 1994; ATOP, 'Tchamba: fin du

influential organisation was Al-Muntadah Al-Islami, a Saudi NGO based in London, which began operating in Togo in 1994.¹⁰¹ Several Togolese Islamic associations, including the *Association pour l'Appel de la Culture Islamique au Togo* (Association for the Call of Islamic Culture in Togo, APACIT)¹⁰² and the CIERI,¹⁰³ were also active. The political landscape was further shaped by President Eyadéma's official visits to Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates in December 1996,¹⁰⁴ followed by Libya in 1999.¹⁰⁵ Togo's membership in the OIC in 1997 underscored these developments.¹⁰⁶

Amidst this backdrop, JEIUB's leaders sought counsel from their 'elders', the organisation's founders, on navigating potential funding from these NGOs. M. S. Mizim'ma Toukounte was appointed chairman of JEIUB's advisory board.¹⁰⁷ The association also remained under the 'patronage' of professor and politician Inoussa Bouraïma. This arrangement was far from symbolic, as Bag'na noted, given the authorities' concerns about 'Islamic fundamentalism' (*'intégrisme islamique'*) during this period,¹⁰⁸ especially with the widely reported actions of the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria in the Togolese media.¹⁰⁹

Under Bag'na's leadership, JEIUB underwent a significant transformation in the mid-1990s. Initially composed solely of UB students, the association expanded to include all Muslim students and pupils from schools and universities across Togo. This period saw the emergence of numerous Muslim student associations throughout the country. In 1992, high school and college students in Lomé founded the *Mouvement de la Jeunesse Islamique du Togo* (Islamic Youth Movement of Togo, MOJIST) to promote Islam in schools.¹¹⁰ Similarly, Muslim high school students in Kara formed the *Cercle des Élèves Musulmans de Kara* (Circle of Muslim Students of Kara, CEMK) during the 1995–96 academic year. One founder explained the group's purpose: 'We are born in Muslim families. Now we go to the White school. So if we

séminaire...,' *Togo-Presse*, 2 April 1994; Amana, 'Associations islamiques du Togo...,' *Togo-Presse*, 13 August 1994; Amana, 'Fin des travaux du WAMY...,' *Togo-Presse*, 23 August 1994.

101 Tchangai, 'Un nouveau centre islamique...,' *Togo-Presse*, 22 June 2000.

102 ATOP, 'Tchaoudjo: APACIT veut redynamiser...,' *Togo-Presse*, January 1994.

103 Adjignon, 'Pèlerinage à La Mecque: les...,' *Togo-Presse*, 18 April 1994.

104 Agnam, 'De Koweit aux Emirats Arabes Unis...,' *Togo-Presse*, 23 December 1996; Agnam, 'Voyage du président Eyadéma au Koweit...,' *Togo-Presse*, 24 December 1996.

105 Tchangai, 'Après une visite d'amitié et de...,' *Togo-Presse*, 7 December 1999.

106 'Le Togo, 55e membre de la...,' *Togo-Presse*, 6 October 1997.

107 M. S. Mizim'ma Toukounte and Kondor Bag'na, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

108 Kondor Bag'na and Yaya Assadou Kolani, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 August 2021.

109 See for example Djabaku, 'Algérie: le FIS à la croisée...,' *Togo-Presse*, 4 March 1992.

110 Soudoukou, 'Assemblée générale du MOJIST...,' *Togo-Presse*, 28 September 1994.

are not careful, we risk losing what we got from our parents, which is Islam.¹¹¹ Similar groups sprang up in Mango, Sokodé, Atakpamé, and Kpalimé.¹¹²

Two key factors prompted JEIUB to collaborate with these student groups. Firstly, the influence of subregional dynamics, characterised by the ‘AEEMisation’ phenomenon, played a significant role.¹¹³ In the early 1990s, JEIUB established connections with other Muslim student movements in West Africa, often participating in mutual visits during school holidays. In 1994, JEIUB attended the second national training seminar for young Muslims organised by the *Association des Élèves et Étudiants Musulmans au Burkina Faso* (AEEMB) in Yako. Bag’na, who participated in this event, noted that JEIUB was the only organisation represented without a national scope, unlike the AEEMB, the *Association des Élèves et Étudiants Musulmans de Côte d’Ivoire* (AEEMCI), and the *Association des Élèves et Étudiants Musulmans du Sénégal* (AEEMS). Upon returning to Togo, JEIUB aimed to unite various local student and school associations into a national movement.¹¹⁴ This initiative continued in July 1995, when the JEIUB hosted 40 university students from AEEMB in Lomé to discuss, among other topics, the management of associations.¹¹⁵

Although Bag’na and the JEIUB leaders had the support of Abdoulaye Alassani, the former president of MOJIST, the preparatory meetings to define the contours of this new federation were challenging. The then head of CEMK recalled significant resistance from both university and high school students, often leading to what he termed a ‘fiasco’.¹¹⁶ However, the decisive involvement of elders such as Minister Abdoul-Hamid Ségoun Tidjani Dourodjaye, a regular supporter of MOJIST and JEIUB activities, and Sani Karim, now the chief imam of the university mosque and vice-president of the UMT, proved crucial in uniting these groups.¹¹⁷ During the 1995 school holidays, a consultative general assembly was held in Bassar, leading to the birth of AEEMT on 16 May 1996, in the great mosque of Doumasséssé near to the campus. Former leaders of MOJIST and CEMK subsequently held significant positions in AEEMT. The AEEMT mission was to ‘contribute to the better practice

111 Ibrahima Ouro-Gouni, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 August 2021.

112 Kondor Bag’na and Yaya Assadou Kolani, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 August 2021.

113 Yaya Hussein Touré, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 14 May 2019.

114 Kondor Bag’na and Yaya Assadou Kolani, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 August 2021.

115 Baro and Sogsey, ‘Vie des Associations,’ *L’Appel*, September 1995, 3.

116 M. S. Mizim’ma Toukounte and Kondor Bag’na, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

117 Yaya Hussein Touré, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 14 May 2019.

of Islam in schools, universities, professional training centres, and university residences, whether public or private, secular or religious, throughout the country.¹¹⁸

Upon its founding, AEEMT established its headquarters in the Adéwi neighbourhood of Lomé. The association's leaders then petitioned the university authorities for a campus space to build a mosque and their headquarters. Two factors favoured their request. Firstly, Rector Seddoh had previously set a precedent by approving the construction of the CCU. Secondly, his departure in September 1995 to join UNESCO left the interim rector, Osséni Tidjani, a Muslim, in charge. Tidjani, along with other Muslim staff at UB, such as Abdourahman Condé, the director of the *Direction de la Formation Permanente, de l'Action et de la Recherche Pédagogiques* (Directorate of Continuing Education, Pedagogical Action and Research, DIFOP), supported the establishment of a dedicated place of worship on campus.¹¹⁹

The university authorities eventually granted AEEMT a plot of land on campus near the CCU. Al-Muntadah Al-Islami funded the construction of a 300-seat mosque and an annex housing the AEEMT's headquarters, at a cost of approximately 15 million CFA francs (22,500 €). The mosque was inaugurated in November 1999 in the presence of representatives of the Muslim Union of Togo and Minister Dourodjaye. In his speech, Dourodjaye emphasised the state's commitment to promoting diverse religions, despite its secular stance, and stressed the importance of rejecting religious fundamentalism (*'intégrisme religieux'*). The press article also noted the growing Muslim community at the University of Benin.¹²⁰

Al-Muntadah Al-Islami further contributed by sending Mouhamed Arabe as a tutor for the students. Born in Togo, Arabe graduated from the International Islamic University of Africa in Sudan and had earned a degree in Islamic law from the Islamic University of Madinah (1991–95). Upon returning to Togo, he began working for Al-Muntadah as a teacher of Muslim students at UB. In 2005, he was appointed director of the NGO's Togolese office.¹²¹ The campus mosque quickly became a vital venue for Arabic learning sessions, Qur'an readings, and preaching.¹²²

118 'A la découverte de l'AEEMT,' accessed 1 February 2023.

119 Ibrahima Ouro-Gouni, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 August 2021.

120 Awui, 'Une mosquée pour la communauté...,' *Togo-Presse*, 1 December 1999; 'Al-Muntada Al Islami-Togo...,' *Togo-Presse*, 17 December 1999.

121 'Al-Muntada change de main...,' *Le Rendez-Vous*, 1 September 2005.

122 Ibrahima Ouro-Gouni, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 August 2021.



Fig. 11: Mosque on the campus of the University of Lomé, 17 August 2021, photo by the author.

The transformation of JEIUB into a national organisation, AEEMT, during the 1990s was not an isolated phenomenon. A similar process was unfolding in neighbouring Benin, where the CIUB was undergoing its own evolution. CIUB faced challenges and opportunities akin to its Togolese counterpart, influenced by similar factors, including growing ties between Benin and the Arab-Muslim world and the ‘AEEMisation’ trend in West Africa.

From the CIUB to the *Association Culturelle des Étudiants et Élèves Musulmans du Bénin* (ACEEMUB)

According to a former CIUB activist from the 1990s, the main challenge for Muslims on campus remained the same as in previous decades: expressing their faith and performing daily prayers. While there were no restrictions on practising their religion at the university, there was no accommodation for it, either. Students had to choose between leaving class to pray or accumulating prayers and performing them

in the evening.¹²³ However, similar to Togo, Benin's relations with the Islamic world in the 1990s were marked by several significant events and visits that impacted the practice of Islam on campus.

One notable event was the visit of the President of its organisation in November 1991 to inaugurate two important projects funded by WICS: the ILACI on the Abomey-Calavi campus, and the Islamic Centre of Dantokpa.¹²⁴ Additionally, President Soglo's official visits to Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates in 1992 aimed at strengthening diplomatic and economic relations with these countries.¹²⁵ Another key event was the official establishment of AMA in Benin in February 1997.¹²⁶ This Kuwaiti Islamic NGO had been active in Benin since 1994, building mosques, social centres, and wells in various regions.¹²⁷ Relations between Benin and Libya, which had cooled after Soglo's election in 1991, resumed after Kérékou's return to power in 1996. This was demonstrated by Kérékou's visit to Libya in March 2000¹²⁸ and Gaddafi's visit to Benin a few months later,¹²⁹ his first since 1983.

Muslim students in Abomey-Calavi greatly benefited from the contributions of their peers at the newly established ILACI, who took on the task of promoting Islam on the university campus.¹³⁰ Announced with great fanfare in 1979 (see Chapter 3), the institute was officially inaugurated in November 1991.¹³¹ Supported by the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ICESCO, formerly ISESCO) and the WICS, ILACI was well-equipped with the necessary teaching materials, faculty, and an operating budget. As Minister Karim Dramane pointed out, the institute aimed to train *Arabisants* familiar with the social, economic, and cultural realities of Arab countries. ILACI's curriculum focused on training Arabic language teachers, interpreters, translators, and diplomats. Additionally, it offered Arabic language courses accessible to students of all disciplines and religions, as well as to professors and anyone interested in learning or improving their Arabic skills.¹³²

123 Zakary Sofian Traoré, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 April 2019.

124 Ahounou, 'Bénin–Libye: arrivée à...', *La Nation*, 14 November 1991; Ahounou, 'Le Centre islamique de Cotonou...', *La Nation*, 18 November 1991.

125 Gnanvi, 'Visite officielle du président Soglo...', *La Nation*, 12 May 1992; Gnanvi, 'La tournée présidentielle au Koweït...', *La Nation*, 22 May 1992.

126 Boni Seni, 'Coopération bénino-koweïtienne...', *La Nation*, 14 February 1997.

127 Tahir, 'L'Agence des musulmans d'Afrique...', *La Nation*, 28 September 1998.

128 Gnanvi, 'Visite d'amitié et de travail en Libye...', *La Nation*, 28 March 2000; Gnanvi, 'Visite d'amitié et de travail du président...', *La Nation*, 29 March 2000.

129 Akponikpe, 'Visite du guide de la Révolution...', *La Nation*, 13 July 2000.

130 Abou-Bakari Imorou, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 14 March 2022.

131 Ahounou, 'Bénin–Libye: inauguration à...', *La Nation*, 15 November 1991.

132 Ahounou, 'Le Centre islamique de Cotonou...', *La Nation*, 18 November 1991.



Fig. 12: ILACI building, 12 June 2024, photo by the author.

Adjacent to the Kim Il-sung university dormitory¹³³ was a multipurpose hall that served as a hub for various cultural, sporting, and religious activities. For many Muslim students, this space functioned as a prayer room or even their campus mosque for Friday prayers. It also hosted most of their meetings and Qur'an classes. During Ramadan, Muslim students would formally request exclusive use of the room for the month, usually granted without controversy. Similarly, if other student groups needed the room for extended periods, they would approach CIUB leaders, who typically accommodated them. Catholic and Protestant students also organised some of their activities there. When the room was unavailable for prayer, Muslim students would pray in the dormitories.¹³⁴ The life of the Muslim community on campus largely revolved around the dormitories. Consequently, the most active CIUB members came from more Islamised regions such as Porto-Novo, Djougou, and Kandi, as their geographical distance from home made living on campus more practical. In contrast, students from nearby areas such as Cotonou

¹³³ Benin's Council of Ministers decided to demolish the building in June 2021. See 'Compte rendu du conseil des ministres du 16 juin 2021,' accessed 23 October 2023.

¹³⁴ Ambdel Gannille Inoussa, in conversation with the author, WhatsApp call, 14 March 2022.

were often absent from these spiritual gatherings, mainly because they did not live on campus.¹³⁵

From 1998 onwards, the idea of a unified Islamic association for school, college, and university students gained traction, influenced by developments elsewhere in West Africa, notably the recent formation of AEEMT in Togo. Similarly, in Benin, groups of Muslim students from various cities formed the *Association des Élèves Musulmans du Bénin* (Association of Muslim Pupils of Benin, AEMB) in the 1990s. Although not active nationwide, AEMB had representation in Cotonou, Porto-Novo, Bohicon, Natitingou, Parakou, and Djougou.¹³⁶ The leaders of CIUB and AEMB thus considered merging, as they shared the same objectives. CIUB members even visited several schools from 1998 to explain to Muslim pupils the benefits of uniting.¹³⁷ However, it took almost three years before Muslim students from across the country convened at Lycée Descartes in Cotonou in February 2001 for a constituent congress to formalise the creation of the *Association Culturelle des Étudiants et Élèves Musulmans du Bénin* (ACEEMUB). To avoid confusion with AEEMB in Burkina Faso, a 'C' was added to the acronym to signify 'Cultural'.¹³⁸

According to Ambdel Gannille Inoussa, the first president of the new association, ACEEMUB's creation was a response to the sub-regional trend of 'AEEMisation' and a fear of the spread of Islamic sects among high school students. Inoussa explained, 'It was a fear that everyone would come with their own [Islamic] ideology, their own way of thinking, their own way of seeing things, and that they would all come to the same university and instead of working together to move forward, they would get in each other's way, which could cause serious problems for Muslim students.'¹³⁹ To prevent this, CIUB leaders proposed a unified organisation. Since the 1990s, the landscape of Islam in Benin has changed significantly, becoming more heterogeneous with the introduction of new mystical orders such as the Alawiyya and the Nimatullahi, alongside the Ahmadiyya and the Tablighi Jamaat, which have gained prominence. In addition, a diffuse and heterogeneous 'reformist' trend, initially driven by transnational Islamic NGOs and graduates of universities in the Arab world, has gained momentum.¹⁴⁰

Like the Bible Group, ACEEMUB was denied permission to build a mosque on the campus in the name of *laïcité*. However, a partnership with the Islamic NGO

135 Abou-Bakari Imorou, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 14 March 2022.

136 Ibrahima Mama Sirou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 8 May 2019.

137 Bourhanou-Dine Mamam Awali, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 18 April 2019.

138 Ambdel Gannille Inoussa, in conversation with the author; WhatsApp call, 14 March 2022.

139 Ibid.

140 Brégand 2006; 2012.

Organisation Humanitaire pour l'Entraide Islamique au Bénin (Humanitarian Organisation for Islamic Mutual Aid in Benin, OHEI-Bénin) enabled ACEEMUB to build the Oumar Ibn Khattab Mosque in 2004. Located in the Zogbadjè neighbourhood, just behind the university campus, this mosque has become a central hub for student prayer and Islamic practice, proudly standing as the first mosque in the vicinity of the university.¹⁴¹

In conclusion, the strengthening ties between Benin, Togo, and the Arab-Muslim world in the 1990s profoundly impacted the religious identity and activism of Muslim student associations. The establishment of ILACI in Benin, the construction of the mosque on the Lomé campus, and the support of transnational Islamic NGOs enhanced the visibility and legitimacy of Islam in the public sphere, empowering associations like CIUB and JEIUB. These developments provided Muslim students with dedicated spaces for religious practice and learning, challenged the perceived dominance of Western education, and asserted the value of Islamic knowledge in the academic setting. The 'AEEMisation' process, involving the creation of unified Islamic associations across educational levels, emerged as a strategic response to the challenges of being a religious minority. By pooling their resources and presenting a united front, AEEMT and ACEEMUB sought to enhance their visibility, legitimacy, and bargaining power with authorities and other student groups. Beyond fulfilling a need for spirituality, Muslim and Christian student organisations on both campuses offered their members a sense of belonging, alleviating the difficulties of surviving in a university environment perceived by many as hostile.

4.4 Navigating Campus Life in Faith-Based Student Associations: Coping with the Challenges of Being a Student

In the 1990s, public universities in Benin and Togo became the focal points of national debates about education, governance, and public policy. Struggling with underfunding, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of institutional autonomy, these institutions mirrored the political climate. Faith-based student associations played crucial roles beyond religious education by integrating new students, providing emotional support during exams, and mediating during political upheaval. In predominantly Christian environments, Muslim student associations aimed to challenge existing prejudices against Islam, complicated by the geopolitical context and changing perceptions of the religion, particularly in light of the Algerian civil war.

141 Tomoussossi and Ogbon, 'Fermeture de la mosquée des étudiants...', *ASSALAM*, January 2019, 4.

The Crisis of Higher Education: Deteriorating Living Conditions on Campuses and their Impact on Students

From the early 1980s until the late 1990s, universities in many African countries faced heavy criticism for being under state control, severely undermining their autonomy and the development of independent academic activities.¹⁴² In both Benin and Togo, Estates General on Education were organised shortly after their respective National Conferences. In Benin, the *États Généraux de l'Éducation* were held in Cotonou in October 1990 as part of the new national policy called for by the National Conference. These special meetings aimed to diagnose the national education system and propose solutions to the impasse created by the New School reform introduced by the revolutionary regime in 1973.¹⁴³ According to the Special Commission on Higher Education and Scientific Research, the UNB faced major issues such as underfunding, lack of resources to promote research, poor utilisation of existing infrastructure, and inadequate scientific documentation. However, the most pressing challenge identified was the 'overcrowded' student population coupled with an 'insufficient' number of teaching staff.¹⁴⁴

Since 1970, the number of students had grown steadily, and the cramped conditions in classrooms, lecture halls, and the university library had become increasingly untenable. Ten years after its foundation, UNB was already operating at nearly 80% of its capacity, with 3,990 students enrolled.¹⁴⁵ This situation worsened with the advent of democratic renewal, leading to a surge in student numbers. According to Künzler's estimates, UNB had 9,794 students in 1990–91, 11,108 in 1995–96, and 22,564 in 2000–01.¹⁴⁶ Despite this significant growth, the university's infrastructure remained largely unchanged, with no major new construction for over twenty years. The primary facilities were those built between 1970 and 1980, a stagnation attributed to the financial constraints of the 1980s revolutionary period and the political inertia of the 1990s.¹⁴⁷ Benin implemented three SAPs between 1989 and 1999, reflecting the economic pressures on the country's education infrastructure. In a controversial move in 1994, President Soglo's government even considered privatising the UNB, underscoring the institution's challenges in accommodating its growing student population.

142 Provini, Mayrargue and Chitou 2020, 3.

143 See Chapter 2.

144 'Actes des états généraux de l'éducation. Cotonou du 2 au 9 Octobre 1990,' Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, 1991, 119.

145 Université d'Abomey-Calavi 2016, 74.

146 Künzler 2008, 220–21.

147 Hounzandji 2021, 261.

The situation at the UB in Lomé was equally difficult at the turn of the 1990s. In 1990, Rector Seddoh highlighted the major challenges of the growing student population and the adequacy of training and employment. This was compounded by the difficulty of 'doing more with much less' due to the decline in government spending on education.¹⁴⁸ At the 1991 National Conference, representatives of teachers and students criticised the failures of education policy since the 1975 reform. They denounced geographical disparities, overcrowding, gender inequalities, lack of qualified staff, insufficient classrooms and teaching materials, difficult working conditions, low salaries, tribalism, and the politicisation of the University of Benin. They called for an Estates General on education, which was held in May 1992.¹⁴⁹

As in Benin, each successive SAP in Togo resulted in cuts to the education budget, the abolition of subsidies, and neglect of university and school facilities. Throughout the 1990s, the living conditions of Togolese students deteriorated. They faced precariousness, recurrent issues with late or non-payment of scholarships, uncertainties about professional integration, and problems with accommodation, food, and transport. The poor quality of teaching and frequent campus strikes were regularly reported upon in the opposition press.¹⁵⁰ The lack of university infrastructure and overcrowding on the Lomé campus exacerbated these issues: from 1,500 students in 1974,¹⁵¹ enrolment rose to 9,000 in 1991¹⁵² and to 24,000 in 2003–04.¹⁵³ These difficulties were intensified by chronic underfunding of education, linked to Togo's deteriorating economic situation, the suspension of international cooperation following the 1993 presidential election, and the devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994.¹⁵⁴ Job prospects after graduation became increasingly uncertain, leading to the formation of the *Union des Diplômés de l'Enseignement Supérieur Sans Emploi* (Union of Unemployed Higher Education Graduates, UDESSE) in 1997,¹⁵⁵ which met with President Eyadéma to address these concerns.¹⁵⁶

148 Aziaglo, 'Gestion des universités en Afrique...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 10 April 1990.

149 Deliry-Antheaume 1995, 726; Awui, 'Etats généraux de l'éducation nationale...', *Togo-Presse*, 7 April 1992.

150 'Il faut équiper l'Université,' *Atopani Express*, 28 March 1991; 'Éditorial: l'Université du Bénin...', *Courrier du Golfe*, 27 May 1991; Faustinos and Focý, 'L'enseignement: un secteur négligé,' *Atopani Express*, 2 July 1991; Agbodji, 'Les étudiants s'interrogent...', *Le Démocrate*, 9 August 1991.

151 'Première réunion du grand...', *Togo-Presse*, 6 October 1979.

152 Lowa, 'Université du Bénin: vingt...', *La Nouvelle Marche*, 13 January 1991.

153 'Université de Lomé: le Pr Gayibor...', *Togo-Presse*, 29 October 2003.

154 Frisch 2021.

155 Balouki, 'Les jeunes de l'UDESSE...', *Togo-Presse*, 11 June 1997.

156 Kamazina, 'Plusieurs milliers d'étudiants et de...', *Togo-Presse*, 20 October 1997.

A 1991 article in the *Atopani Express* noted that students had to rise at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning to secure a seat in class.¹⁵⁷ In 1998, *Togo-Presse* published a detailed report titled 'How to get a room in the "Cité U"? A nightmare for the Togolese student', highlighting the difficulty of accommodating students in university halls of residence due to the significant increase in enrolment. Many students from other towns in Togo could not afford a room in Lomé with their scholarship, and only a fifth of the 16,500 students were housed in the university's residences and villas. The shortage of rooms led to corruption and favouritism in the allocation of student accommodation. Moreover, it was common for students to share rooms with friends, relatives, or acquaintances, resulting in four students in a double room or two in a single room.¹⁵⁸

As student enrolment soared, the availability of on-campus accommodation progressively declined, despite government efforts to expand capacity. Campus canteens and transport services similarly failed to keep pace with growing needs. Additionally, the state struggled to provide scholarships or financial aid to a large proportion of the student population. Consequently, most students faced precarious living and studying conditions, often residing in cramped rented rooms without basic amenities such as electricity and running water, and struggling to secure adequate food.

In Togo and Benin, student strikes became an integral part of the academic calendar, with few academic years in the 1990s passing uninterrupted. Even after the transition to civilian rule under President Soglo, the Abomey-Calavi campus remained plagued by unrest and riots. Student demands frequently centred on improving living and studying conditions, including scholarships, accommodation, food, and transport. Between 1992 and 2001, the UNB was particularly contentious, with both Presidents Soglo and Kérékou struggling to contain frequent protests by students and professors, such as the massive strike in 1999 that lasted almost two months. Demonstrations often led to violent clashes between students and the police. A significant number of young graduates faced unemployment, especially after the end of automatic public sector recruitment in Benin in 1987,¹⁵⁹ forcing many to become motorbike taxi drivers, commonly known as *Zémidjan*. One solution in both countries was the creation of a second public university: in Kara (Togo) in 1999, and in Parakou (Benin) in 2001, as will be discussed in the next chapter. In this context, faith-based associations on campus provided invaluable social and

157 'Il faut équiper l'Université,' *Atopani Express*, 28 March 1991.

158 Waguena, 'Comment gagner une chambre...', *Togo-Presse*, 11 September 1998.

159 Université d'Abomey-Calavi 2016, 44.

spiritual support to their members, who perceived the environment as increasingly hostile.

Support, Mediation and Networking on Campus and Beyond: Christian and Islamic Student Associations Activities in the 1990s

In both Benin and Togo, faith-based student associations emerged as vital support networks, helping to fill the void left by the retreating state. They offered spiritual guidance and practical assistance, such as help with registration, accommodation, and academic tutoring. These associations fostered a sense of belonging and identity for students who often felt alienated and marginalised on campus. By creating a space for religious expression and community building, groups like the JEC, GBEEB, AEEMT, and ACEEMUB enabled students to navigate campus challenges while maintaining a sense of purpose and direction. The social curriculum provided by these associations, which included soft skills training, leadership development, and civic engagement, complemented the formal academic curriculum, equipping students with the tools to succeed both on campus and beyond.

A student from Parakou recounted his arrival at Abomey-Calavi in the 1990s. Without knowing anyone or having family to rely on, the support from GBEEB members significantly eased his campus integration and motivated him to become actively involved in the association. A GBEEB leader even visited his apartment to ensure he was settling in and later became his mentor throughout his university years.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, the CIUB, and later the ACEEMUB, assisted newly arrived Muslims in enrolling and integrating on campus.¹⁶¹ According to one activist, solidarity within the CIUB was especially evident during emotionally and mentally demanding periods like exams, with activities such as nightly prayers, Qur'an readings, and *dhikr*¹⁶² recitations, typically held on Thursday evenings.¹⁶³

Similarly, the AEEMT provided support beyond Islamic training to newly arrived students on the Lomé campus. A former AEEMT leader recounted that, upon his arrival at UB in 1995–96, he initially felt no need to join an association to better practise his religion. However, witnessing the actions of AEEMT activ-

160 Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

161 Zakary Sofian Traoré, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 April 2019.

162 *Dhikr*, often translated as 'remembrance', refers to the Islamic practice of repeating phrases verbally or mentally to remember and glorify God, and serves as a spiritual exercise to deepen one's faith and awareness of the divine presence.

163 Abou-Bakari Imorou, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 14 March 2022.

ists, who offered comprehensive support including registration, accommodation, and other administrative procedures, changed his perspective.¹⁶⁴ Another former leader agreed, pointing out that the AEEMT not only provided religious training but also addressed academic issues. Students and elders organised free tutoring sessions at all levels, from *classe de sixième* to university, helping activists in their coursework.¹⁶⁵ GBUST also emphasised integrating new students, offering a ‘community of mutual help and support’ for young people from the interior arriving on campus.¹⁶⁶

For faith-based organisations on both campuses, the goal extended beyond imparting religious knowledge and values. They aimed to equip students with a broad range of skills to complement their academic training, forming a social curriculum designed to enable students to make an impact on their milieu. For instance, alongside various religious activities such as meetings, trainings, spiritual retreats, and promoting sexual fidelity and abstinence in the fight against HIV/AIDS,¹⁶⁷ the JEC-U in Lomé was notably active in the *Journée de l’Arbre* (Arbor Day) on 1 June, an event that remains a point of pride for many alumni.¹⁶⁸ The *Jécistes* also launched the bimonthly publication *L’Agenda JEC*, featuring columns on student life, time management methods, research, study skills, and more.¹⁶⁹ They contributed to the ‘*De ma fenêtre*’ (‘From my window’) column in the newspaper *Présence Chrétienne*, which was relaunched in March 1994 after nearly twenty years.¹⁷⁰ The JEC-U did not shy away from responding to socio-political events and issuing communiqués, while maintaining an apolitical stance, feeling somewhat protected by the Archdiocese of Lomé and the Bishops’ Conference.¹⁷¹ Agbobli, the university’s chaplain, ‘took the risk here, at mass, of saying out loud what the students were thinking down below’, even leading to his passport being confiscated by the state.¹⁷²

The flagship initiative of the JEC-U in the 1990s was campus mediation. Throughout the decade, the UB witnessed numerous student strikes and demonstrations, often met with brutal repression by security forces,¹⁷³ including the army, and inci-

164 Yaya Assadou Kolani and AEEMT leader, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 15 May 2019.

165 Taofik Bonfoh, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

166 Armand Dzadu, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 12 August 2021.

167 Batassi, ‘La jeunesse étudiante chrétienne...’, *Togo-Presse*, 21 December 2001.

168 Modeste Lemon, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 November 2022.

169 Théophile Tonyeme, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 7 September 2021.

170 Broohm, ‘Le journal catholique “Présence chrétienne”...’, *Togo-Presse*, 9 March 2004; Ayetan, ‘Au Togo, le mensuel Présence Chrétienne...’, *La Croix Africa*, 28 March 2019.

171 Sabin Sonhaye, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

172 Ibid.

173 Abueno, ‘Branle-bas sur le Campus universitaire...’, *L’éveil du Peuple*, 23 January 1998.

dents of vandalism¹⁷⁴ and violence among rival student groups involving clubs and knives.¹⁷⁵ This climate of insecurity and hyper-politicisation on campus,¹⁷⁶ reflective of wider Togolese society, stemmed from challenges to Eyadéma's power and demands for improved student living conditions. The socio-political liberalisation facilitated the emergence of numerous student unions, such as the *Organisation Universitaire de Lutte pour la Démocratie au Togo* (University Organisation of Struggle for Democracy in Togo, OULDT), the *Mouvement Étudiant de Lutte pour la Démocratie* (Student Movement of Struggle for Democracy, MELD), the *Groupe de Réflexion et d'Action des jeunes pour la Démocratie* (Group of Reflection and Action of the youth for Democracy, GRAD), and the *Haut Conseil de Coordination des Associations et Mouvements Estudiantins* (High Council of Coordination of the Associations and Movements of Students, HaCAME). Additionally, many actors deplored the 'tribalism' that arose from the instrumentalisation of ethnic and regional interests.¹⁷⁷

Inspired by Bishop Kpodzro's mediating role during the National Conference and the transitional government,¹⁷⁸ JEC-U activists aspired to play a similar role on campus.¹⁷⁹ One of the JEC-U's mottos was to 'bring light' (*'porter la lumière'*) to 'pacify the campus, which was a battlefield', even within their own ranks, which included students of various political persuasions.¹⁸⁰ The JEC-U intervened not only between rival student unions but also between students and the university administration. Notably, they defended a student summoned to the disciplinary committee for writing a pamphlet titled 'Fear of Living on Campus'.¹⁸¹ The JEC-U also established a social commission to document student challenges, addressing such issues as transport, where tensions between bus drivers and students often led to jostling and fights. They implemented a mediation system to ensure students could take the bus calmly.¹⁸² Moreover, JEC-U leaders organised an event with JEIUB and GBUST focused on ethnocentric issues and interfaith dialogue.¹⁸³

174 Oboubé, 'Contre l'insécurité sur le campus...', *Togo-Presse*, 21 January 1992.

175 On the use of violence by the youth during this period, see Toulabor 1996a.

176 'Perception des bourses à l'UB...', *Togo-Presse*, 19 February 1992.

177 Klukpo, 'La Bible, le gourdin et l'argent,' *Courrier du Golfe*, 13 May 1991; 'Encore du tribalisme dans le milieu...', *Forum Hebdo*, 12 July 1991.

178 Toulabor 1997, 228.

179 Sabin Sonhaye, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

180 Blaise Pagmiou, in conversation with the author, Zoom call, 9 November 2021.

181 Théophile Tonyeme, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 7 September 2021.

182 Blaise Pagmiou, in conversation with the author, Zoom call, 9 November 2021.

183 Théophile Tonyeme, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 7 September 2021.

In Benin, although the political climate and campus situation were less dire than in Togo, mediation remained a significant activity of faith-based student associations. The advent of a multi-party system in Benin led to a situation in which numerous political parties quickly began recruiting members on campus. This resulted in intense struggles for control of student unions and the fragmentation of the *Fédération Nationale des Étudiants du Bénin* (National Federation of Beninese Students, FNEB), founded in April 1990 by the student cooperative of the revolutionary era. In August 1992, students defeated in the FNEB elections formed the *Union des Étudiants du Bénin* (Union of Students of Benin, UNEB), which aligned with President Soglo's regime. The following year, the *Union Nationale des Scolaires et Étudiants du Bénin* (National Union of Pupils and Students of Benin, UNSEB), with a communist orientation, was established.¹⁸⁴ Additionally, regional and ethnic-based student associations further complicated the competitive landscape. This competition often involved malpractice and corruption due to the benefits associated with union leadership, such as free accommodation, free transport on university buses, and the administration of subsidies by the COUS. Moreover, student union activism facilitated the development of significant political contacts.¹⁸⁵

Like the JEC-U in Togo, the JEC at Abomey-Calavi sought to remain apolitical in the 1990s, consistently taking a 'clear stand in the light of the Gospel' during student uprisings. Mediation was a crucial aspect of their activities, along with maintaining sanitation and order in the library.¹⁸⁶ GBEEB adopted a similar stance. During the major university strike in 1999, GBEEB officially called for an end to hostilities between authorities and students through posters and radio announcements.¹⁸⁷ This approach had been initiated by GBEEB alumni since 1990. For instance, Friends of the GBEEB in Cotonou contributed to the preparatory committee for the National Conference, impressing Protestant leaders with the quality of their proposals. As a result, the secretary of GBEEB's national executive committee was chosen as one of the Protestant church delegates,¹⁸⁸ along with Pastor Henry Harry and Professor Paulin Hountondji. According to Jacob Dossou, 'They understood that we are detached from politics, but at the same time we want the good and the progress of the nation.'¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ Nouwligbèto 2018, 130.

¹⁸⁵ Université d'Abomey-Calavi 2016, 91–94.

¹⁸⁶ Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 11 March 2022.

¹⁸⁷ Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

¹⁸⁸ Officially, the religious communities had eighteen representatives: four each for the Catholic Church, the Protestants, the Muslims, and traditional cults, and two for the Celestial Church of Christ.

¹⁸⁹ Jacob Djossou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 19 March 2022.

The mediating role played by these associations amid political tensions and campus unrest can be understood as an effort to uphold a moral order grounded in non-violence, dialogue, and the common good. By positioning themselves as neutral arbiters and advocates for student welfare, groups like the JEC-U in Togo and the JEC in Benin sought to mitigate the disruptive effects of partisan politics and ethnic rivalries on campus life. This moral stance was rooted in a shared understanding of the university as a place for learning, personal growth, and social transformation, rather than a battleground for political or sectarian interests.

Faith-based student associations in Lomé and Abomey-Calavi, as in the 1980s, maintained links with other organisations both within the subregion and internationally. The CIUB/ACEEMUB and JEIUB/AEEMT had close relations with other Muslim student associations in West Africa. Similarly, the dynamism of the Togolese JEC in the 1990s had a regional and international impact. In the early 1990s, the JEC-U organised a pan-African meeting of university JECs in Lomé. Leaders of the JEC-U held positions at the pan-African and even international levels. For example, Maximin Binabawai Adjaté, national coordinator of JEC Togo (1988–99), was appointed leader of the JEC at the pan-African level.¹⁹⁰ Sabin Sonhaye was appointed one of the pan-African JEC delegates to the JEC World Congress in Paris and also represented JEC at UNESCO.¹⁹¹ As for the Bible groups, the GBEEB organised the 11th triennial congress of the GBUAF in Cotonou in 1999,¹⁹² while the same year, GBUST became an affiliate member of the IFES in South Korea. The fate of former activists of faith-based student association is analysed in more detail in Chapter 6.

In sum, the activities of Christian and Islamic student associations in Benin and Togo during the 1990s represent a form of ‘moral economy’. This concept, initially developed by Thompson¹⁹³ and later expanded by Scott,¹⁹⁴ refers to the shared moral understandings and reciprocal obligations that shape economic transactions and social relationships within a community. On university campuses where students faced economic hardship, political upheaval, and social alienation, faith-based associations became essential support networks. These groups provided spiritual guidance, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging. Their moral economy was rooted in a collective understanding of the challenges students faced and a commitment to mutual aid and solidarity. By offering help with registration, accommodation, and academic tutoring, as well as spaces for religious expression

¹⁹⁰ Vivianne Togbi, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 27 August 2021.

¹⁹¹ Sabin Sonhaye, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

¹⁹² Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

¹⁹³ Thompson 1971.

¹⁹⁴ Scott 1977.

and community building, associations like the JEC, GBEEB, AEEMT, and ACEEMUB created a safety net for students often left to fend for themselves amidst state retreat and institutional dysfunction. The social curriculum they provided – encompassing soft skills training, leadership development, and civic engagement – functioned as a form of moral education. This curriculum aimed to equip students with the tools to navigate the challenges of campus life and beyond. Furthermore, their mediating role amid political tensions and campus unrest reflected an effort to uphold a moral order grounded in non-violence, dialogue, and the common good.

Being a Muslim Student on a Christian-Dominated Campus

For the Muslim student associations, their status as a religious minority in a predominantly Christian context significantly influenced their activities at the universities of Lomé and Abomey-Calavi. The challenges Muslim students faced in Togo and Benin as they navigated campus and societal prejudices against Islam strengthened their sense of religious identity and solidarity within their associations. Confronted with misconceptions about the compatibility of Islam with Western education and notions of a ‘true’ Beninese or Togolese identity, these students sought to demonstrate that one could be both a devout Muslim and an intellectual in a Western academic setting. In response, the associations developed strategies to promote a more authentic and intellectually engaged vision of Islam.

The AEEMT’s activities aimed to foster young Muslims who freely practised their religion while combating prejudices from both Muslims and non-Muslims. Similar to other countries in the region,¹⁹⁵ these students first had to convince their co-religionists that a Western-educated Muslim could earnestly practise Islam: ‘Being in a secular country, we found that the majority of students, both girls and boys, [...] did not easily demonstrate their faith because of their contact with Western schools, which were not as conducive to learning religion.’¹⁹⁶ One former activist noted, ‘It was crucial to show that there was not this clear dichotomy between Islam and Western culture, but that those who came out of Western education could work to promote the values of Islam.’¹⁹⁷

The National Qur’an Recitation Contest, a flagship AEEMT activity held annually during Ramadan since 1995, has been pivotal in this effort. This initiative

¹⁹⁵ Camara and Bodian 2016; Madore and Binaté 2023.

¹⁹⁶ Yaya Assadou Kolani and AEEMT leader, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 15 May 2019.

¹⁹⁷ Latifou Assikpa, Ouro Padnna Essoh Izotou and Halourou Maman, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 19 May 2019.

aimed to dispel the perception of incompatibility between Qur'anic and Western education. Initially organised in the UB amphitheatres,¹⁹⁸ the competition has been held at the Lomé Congress Centre since 2002¹⁹⁹ and has generated unprecedented enthusiasm among Togo's Muslim community. AEEMT activists also sought to integrate their academic training with their religious practice. During the university's Student Culture Week, activists explained the relationship between their field of study and the Qur'an, illustrating that Western and Islamic knowledge can indeed complement each other.²⁰⁰

Similarly, the CIUB in Benin aimed to bridge the gap between Western-educated Muslims and those educated in Islamic schools, illustrating that one could be both an intellectual and a 'good' Muslim: 'We noticed widespread illiteracy in the Muslim community. This was because, historically, some Muslim parents perceived modern schools as incompatible with religion and thus rejected this form of education.'²⁰¹ According to the first president of ACEEMUB, Western-educated Muslims in Benin faced a dual challenge. Their primary challenge lay in the scepticism of those educated in Islamic schools regarding the authenticity of Western-educated Muslims. ACEEMUB's principal goal was to bridge this divide by demonstrating that 'it is possible to be an intellectual in a Western academic environment and a true and devout Muslim.'²⁰² They also aimed to counter the notion that Beninese identity was incompatible with Islam:

Muslims in Benin are generally ashamed of their Islam. [...] Very often, they feel inferior. Our effort to eliminate these feelings must not be confined to Calavi and the university; it must permeate all of Benin. It's as if being truly Beninese excludes being Muslim. We needed to make Beninese society understand that one can be both Beninese and a true Muslim.²⁰³

The challenges faced by Muslim women, including prejudice, misconceptions about Islam's stance on women's rights, and the difficulties of wearing the veil on campus, led the CIUB to establish a women's cell to organise activities addressing these issues. According to a former female activist, while many women were involved in CIUB, mobilising 'sisters' was more challenging than mobilising 'brothers'. Some feared, mistakenly, that joining the association would force them to wear the veil. Many Muslim women also felt ashamed of their religion. Wearing the veil on campus

¹⁹⁸ ATOP, 'JEIB / Concours national de meilleurs...', *Togo-Presse*, 9 March 1995.

¹⁹⁹ Batassi, 'La 6e édition du concours international...', *Togo-Presse*, 26 November 2002.

²⁰⁰ Yaya Assadou Kolani and AEEMT leader, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 15 May 2019.

²⁰¹ Ibrahima Mama Sirou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 8 May 2019.

²⁰² Ambdel Gannille Inoussa, in conversation with the author, WhatsApp call, 14 March 2022.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

was particularly challenging, as some students had been expelled by professors for doing so. To counter these issues, CIUB organised weekly activities through its women's cell. They discovered that many women lacked a thorough understanding of Islam, often confusing tradition with religion – a misconception frequently reinforced by the media, particularly regarding female genital mutilation and forced marriage.²⁰⁴ For example, in an interview with the president of the *Association Féminine pour la Promotion de l'Islam* (Women's Association for the Promotion of Islam, AFPI), a journalist from *La Nation* wrote, 'Muslim women are constrained in many ways. Islam, as some would say, produces submissive women [...]. They are not allowed to pray among men, they must live in the background, covered from head to toe. [...] It seems that the Muslim woman is subject to many restrictions and that her religious beliefs give her a second-class status.'²⁰⁵

The lethargy of ILACI was another major concern for CIUB in the 1990s. Despite its official inauguration in 1991, the institute remained non-operational as of July 1995, with no courses offered.²⁰⁶ This stagnation prompted the CIUB president to publish an opinion piece in *La Nation*, denouncing the blockage on behalf of Muslim students:

The leaders of the C.I.U.B. decided, after their meeting, to contact the authorities first, including an audience with the Minister of National Education, which has not yet been granted, and a forthcoming audience with the leaders of the U.I.B. It is clear that they [Muslim students] are determined to be heard and to express their dissatisfaction. Given the seriousness of the situation, the C.I.U.B. urgently appeals to the entire national Muslim community to mobilise in defence of the interests of Benin's Muslims.²⁰⁷

This article sparked controversy about the place of ILACI within the National University of Benin and its relationship with *laïcité*, as illustrated by a response published in *La Nation*. The author of the tribune stated, 'ILACI is neither a mosque nor a Qur'anic school', emphasising that it is a secular institute within the National University of Benin, as highlighted by the Minister of Education at its inauguration. ILACI is open to all Beninese, regardless of race or religion, who wish to learn Arabic, one of the official languages of the United Nations. Therefore, it does not belong to Muslims or non-Muslims exclusively. The author argued that mobilising the Muslim community around this cause was inappropriate and even 'sympto-

204 Mariam Abaounrin, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 May 2019.

205 Aguiar, 'Mme Darou-Salim Zaria...', *Togo-Presse*, 16 February 1996.

206 Abdoulaye 2007, 137.

207 Nasser, 'La Communauté islamique universitaire...', *La Nation*, 21 July 1995.

matic of a march towards jihad.²⁰⁸ These remarks should be understood in the context of fears about fundamentalism (*'intrégrisme'*) and Islamism, partly due to the civil war in Algeria. In 1995, the Beninese media occasionally evoked these fears, especially after four Algerian Islamists expelled from France ended up in neighbouring Burkina Faso. There were rumours that these militants might seek refuge in Benin, which, according to the press, was already a target for Islamists.²⁰⁹ After numerous delays and setbacks, ILACI finally opened its doors in 1999.²¹⁰

Amid growing unease about the role of Islam in public life, exacerbated by the Algerian civil war, JEIUB leaders in Togo also felt the need to promote a more nuanced relationship between Islam, violence, and politics. In January 1995, the JEIUB, in collaboration with the Islamic Cultural Centre of Lomé, organised a panel discussion at the University of Benin on the topic: 'Is Islam a source of violence?' The event's keynote speaker, Fambaré Ouattara Natchaba, a law professor at UB, used the example of the Algerian civil war to explain that it is often the breakdown of dialogue between political authorities and the population that can escalate into violence. In these instances, Islam was often utilised to empower the people, who then used it as a cover for waging a political struggle.²¹¹ This suspicion of Islam was rekindled in the early 2000s following the events of 9/11, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

While both Christian and Muslim student associations faced the task of maintaining their religious identity and practices within a predominantly secular academic environment, the challenges and opportunities they encountered differed significantly due to their respective positions as majority and minority religious communities. Christian associations, with their established church links and numerical strength, could more easily assert their presence on campus. In contrast, Muslim associations had to navigate the complexities of being a religious minority in a predominantly Christian environment. The JEIUB and CIUB faced prejudice and misconceptions about Islam from both within the Muslim community and the wider society. They had to work harder to establish their legitimacy and gain recognition from university authorities. Despite these differences, both Christian and Muslim associations exhibited remarkable resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity. They developed innovative strategies, such as the 'AEEMisation' process in Togo and Benin, to enhance their organisational capacity and extend their influence beyond the university campus. They also leveraged their transnational net-

208 Oladeji, 'UNB: Institut de langue arabe...', *La Nation*, 22 August 1995.

209 Assevi, 'Le Bénin terre d'asile...', *La Nation*, 21 March 1995.

210 S., 'Crise Libyenne: le sort...', *ASSALAM*, December 2011, 9.

211 ATOP, 'Au Centre culturel islamique de Lomé...', *Togo-Presse*, 25 January 1995.

works, participating in regional and international conferences and collaborating with faith-based NGOs, to access resources and expertise.

The divergent paths of democratisation in Benin and Togo in the early 1990s impacted the strategies and experiences of faith-based student associations on the Abomey-Calavi and Lomé campuses. In Benin, the relatively peaceful transition from Kérékou's dictatorship to a model democracy created a more conducive environment for the growth and activities of these associations. In contrast, the more turbulent and ultimately unfulfilled democratic aspirations in Togo posed greater challenges. Despite the initial opening of political space following the National Conference, the entrenched authoritarianism of the Eyadéma regime and persistent political violence limited the scope for autonomous student activism. Groups like the JEC-U and JEIUB had to navigate a more complex and restrictive political landscape, balancing their religious identities with the need to avoid direct confrontation with the state.

While the specific trajectories of democratisation undoubtedly influenced these groups' strategies and experiences, their resilience and adaptability highlight the relative autonomy of religious dynamics from central politics. The continued dynamism of faith-based student activism on the Abomey-Calavi and Lomé campuses, despite the divergent outcomes of democratisation in Benin and Togo, points to the enduring significance of religion as a source of identity, community, and social engagement for many university students. The ability of these associations to maintain a degree of autonomy from central politics, even in the face of state repression or co-optation attempts, suggests that religious dynamics on university campuses are not entirely determined by the broader political environment.

During this period, there were striking similarities in the experiences of faith-based student associations in both countries. In Benin and Togo, these groups emerged as important actors in the broader landscape of civil society, providing spaces for religious expression, community building, and social support in the face of economic crisis and deteriorating living conditions on campus. The activities of Christian and Islamic associations began to diversify, going beyond religious training and contributing to the development of a social curriculum that offered students spaces for socialisation and a set of soft skills, norms, and moral values that complemented their secular academic curriculum. This trend accelerated from the 2000s onwards, particularly with an emphasis on entrepreneurship and leadership development.

5 Developing Leaders with Moral Values: Providing Entrepreneurial Skills Beyond the Academic Curriculum (2000–10s)

The fifth chapter explores the transformation of faith-based student activism over the past two decades, an era often considered a ‘golden age’ for these movements. During this time, Christian and Islamic student associations adapted their objectives to the changing socio-economic landscape by organising workshops, conferences, and round tables centred on entrepreneurship and skill development for the labour market. This strategic shift recognised that a university education alone was no longer sufficient to meet the demands of the contemporary labour market. The chapter emphasises the unique value of the social curriculum offered by these associations, which sets participating students apart from their peers who possess only academic qualifications.

The first section examines political developments and higher education reforms, including the growing influence of evangelical Christianity in Benin’s politics and challenges to democracy in both countries. It also discusses the expansion of higher education through the creation of new public universities and the introduction of the Licence-Master-Doctorate (LMD) system. Despite these advancements, ongoing challenges such as funding shortages and the disconnect between educational offerings and local development needs continue to pose significant hurdles.

The second section analyses the activities of faith-based associations at the University of Lomé and the University of Abomey-Calavi, focusing on how they broadened their scope in the 2000s to encompass social issues such as health awareness while providing practical support to students. Although students often join faith-based associations primarily for religious activities, they also appreciate the organisation as a hub for establishing meaningful friendships and supportive networks. While numerous Catholic and Protestant associations are now active on both campuses, AEEMT and ACEEMUB remain the sole Islamic associations. However, the emergence of Salafism since the 2000s has challenged this unity. Interestingly, the focus of student debates has shifted from doctrinal controversies to more pragmatic matters such as entrepreneurship and youth employment, as emphasised in the third section.

Against the backdrop of expanding private universities and rising graduate unemployment, these faith-based groups are innovating to help students develop crucial skills beyond the academic curriculum, enabling them to successfully navigate and thrive in the challenging labour market. By emphasising leadership,

entrepreneurship, and responsible citizenship, these groups aim to strike a delicate balance between civic engagement and political neutrality, concentrating on empowering their members for broader socio-economic roles while generally avoiding direct political affiliation.

5.1 Democratic Challenges and Higher Education Reforms

This section provides an overview of the main political developments and reforms in higher education in Benin and Togo over the last two decades. In Benin under Presidents Kérékou and Boni Yayi, there was a significant increase in evangelical figures assuming governmental roles, blending evangelical Christian values with politics. This period saw heightened criticism of authoritarianism and democratic erosion, which intensified under President Patrice Talon. In Togo, the controversial ascent of Faure Gnassingbé and subsequent challenges to democracy, including opposition fragmentation and Gnassingbé's power consolidation efforts, culminated in the disputed 2020 elections. In higher education, the rapid growth in student numbers from previous decades continued into the 2000s, prompting the establishment of the University of Parakou and the University of Kara to alleviate overcrowding at the University of Abomey-Calavi and the University of Lomé. Despite these efforts, including the implementation of the LMD system to enhance the quality of higher education, significant challenges persist, such as funding shortages, management issues, and a mismatch between educational offerings and local development needs.

Shifting Paradigms: Political Dynamics from 2000 to 2020

As noted in the previous chapter, Kérékou's return to power in 1996 saw the growing influence of evangelical and Pentecostal intellectuals who aimed to infuse Christian values into Benin's politics and public sphere, which increased further during Kérékou's second democratic term. This period was marked by a concerted effort to elevate Christian leaders to prominent governmental roles, actively promoted and supported by various church bodies and their pastors. Although efforts to promote Christian leadership had begun earlier, it was not until the early 2000s that evangelical ministers were formally included in the government, despite the presence of active evangelical figures in the administration.¹ The growing influence of evan-

¹ Strandsbjerg 2015.

gical networks in Benin's state affairs was evident in the establishment of prayer groups within government ministries and in transnational evangelical networks involving state officials, businessmen, and religious leaders operating both formally and informally.²

Criticism of the ties between political power and evangelical movements in Benin intensified during the 2006–16 presidency of 'Pastor-President' Thomas Boni Yayi, a fervent born-again Christian. A former president of the West African Development Bank (BOAD) and a political outsider with no previous electoral experience or mainstream party backing, Boni Yayi campaigned in 2006 on a platform of change and economic revitalisation. His highly professional campaign used innovative tools that modernised political campaigning in Benin. Unlike his opponents, who relied on strong but localised regional support bases, Boni Yayi's diverse background connected him to different demographic groups across the north, centre-east, and south of Benin, enabling him to appeal to a broad spectrum of voters.³

Born into a Muslim family in 1952, Boni Yayi converted to evangelical Christianity in his youth and later became a born-again Christian after distancing himself from his church, the Union of Evangelical Churches of Benin.⁴ As a pastor of the Assemblies of God church in the Gbèdjomédé district of Cotonou, where he preached, he received strong support from the evangelical community, particularly from Pastor Michel Alokpo. Alokpo, an adviser to the president on internal affairs and chargé de mission to the interior minister, Armand Zinzindohoué, was appointed secretary general of the *Cadre de Concertation des Confessions Religieuses* (Framework for Consultation of Religious Communities, CCCR), established by Boni Yayi in 2007.

Under President Boni Yayi, Benin experienced political turmoil and accusations of authoritarianism, especially following his controversial re-election in 2011. Allegations of vote-rigging and efforts to consolidate power raised concerns about the country's democratic trajectory. The fragmented opposition struggled to effectively challenge the regime. Boni Yayi's attempt to amend the constitution to allow a third term in office further escalated tensions, sparking widespread protests and even public criticism from the Catholic Church, which broke its silence for the first time since the National Conference. These efforts to consolidate power led to increased political instability and significant public backlash, including initiatives such as the 'Don't Touch My Constitution' movement and 'Red Wednesdays' protests in July

2 Strandsbjerg 2005b, 225.

3 Mayrargue 2006.

4 Mayrargue 2007, 313.

2013.⁵ However, according to Banégas, these developments did not fundamentally undermine Benin's young democracy.⁶

The current president, Patrice Talon, elected in 2016 and re-elected in 2021, has faced accusations of authoritarianism. The 2019 legislative elections triggered a significant electoral and political crisis, largely due to amendments to the Charter of Political Parties and the Electoral Code. These amendments imposed stricter conditions for political party participation, effectively sidelining the main opposition parties.⁷ This development led many Western media to lament the 'fall of a model democracy' in West Africa.⁸ However, some analysts have argued that signs of democratic decline in Benin were evident long before Talon's presidency. Issues such as poor governance, neo-patrimonialism, and the suppression of civil liberties have been cited as contributing to the erosion of democratic institutions. Despite a formal transition to democracy, the country has struggled to deliver substantial benefits to its people.⁹ This failure has been attributed to an inability to dismantle Benin's entrenched political-economic structures. The economy remains burdened by structural fiscal and external deficits, perpetuating Benin's status as a neo-patrimonial rentier state. In such a system, material benefits are directly linked to political connections, fostering an environment ripe for corruption. Despite steps towards democratisation, Benin has yet to overcome fundamental development challenges, such as the transition from a rent-based to a productive economy. Moreover, a political culture steeped in regionalism persists, with little prospect of more inclusive political ideologies.¹⁰

In Togo, between 1999 and 2005, the country's multiparty system was further weakened by divisions within the opposition. In 2005, the death of President Eyadéma triggered a constitutional succession process in which the President of the National Assembly, Fambaré Ouattara Natchaba, provisionally assumed power for 60 days pending new elections. However, Eyadéma's apparent preference for his son, Faure Gnassingbé, as his successor, supported by key members of the *Forces Armées Togolaises* (Togolese Armed Forces, FAT) and the ruling RPT, disrupted this process. With Natchaba abroad, General Zakari Nandja declared a power vacuum, and the FAT suspended the constitution, closed the borders, and installed Gnassingbé as president. This manoeuvre, which essentially sidelined Natchaba, was widely

5 Banégas 2014a.

6 Banégas 2014b.

7 Ologou 2019.

8 Booty, 'How Benin's Democratic Crown....' *BBC News*, 6 May 2019; Paduano, 'The Fall of a Model Democracy,' *The Atlantic*, 29 May 2019.

9 Kohnert and Preuss 2019.

10 Bierschenk 2009.

condemned internationally. Under intense international pressure, including sanctions, Gnassingbé finally agreed to step down. The National Assembly then reversed an earlier amendment that had extended the provisional presidency to a full term, reinstating the original 60-day transition period. On 25 February, the National Assembly elected Abass Bonfoh, its former vice-president, as provisional president. Despite widespread allegations of electoral fraud and the outbreak of violent protests and human rights abuses, Gnassingbé was officially declared the winner of the subsequent presidential election on 25 April, securing a five-year term.¹¹ According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), ‘about 400 to 500 people were slain and thousands were wounded in Togo after the sudden death of its long-time president in February and disputed presidential elections in April.’¹²

Over the years, the Togolese opposition has shown increasing fragmentation and strategic miscalculation. In 2010, Gilchrist Olympio of the *Union des Forces de Changement* (UFC) party withdrew from the presidential race at the last minute and endorsed Jean-Pierre Fabre. Gnassingbé defeated Fabre in the 2010 presidential election by a margin of 61–34%. Ignoring Fabre’s allegations of electoral fraud, Olympio signed a separate agreement to form a coalition government with the RPT in the weeks following the election. This unilateral action by the influential UFC undermined its longstanding opposition to the RPT, leading many to label the UFC as traitors. This sentiment was particularly strong among Fabre’s UFC faction, which subsequently broke away to form a new party, the *Alliance Nationale pour le Changement* (ANC), under Fabre’s leadership.

Political manoeuvring continued unabated. Despite socio-political unrest and international scrutiny, Gnassingbé consolidated his power. He navigated internal factionalism to dissolve the troubled RPT and replace it with the *Union pour la République* (UNIR) in 2012. Subsequent elections have generally favoured UNIR, despite recurrent protests and sporadic violence. The government’s lack of responsiveness to opposition demands, particularly regarding term limits and electoral reforms, has fuelled ongoing discontent. Meanwhile, several opposition groups, including the ANC and various civil society groups, came together in various coalitions such as the *Collectif Sauvons le Togo* (CST) and the Coalition of 14 (C14). Despite initial enthusiasm and large-scale protests, these coalitions faced obstacles such as government crackdowns and internal disagreements, leading to their eventual disintegration. Gnassingbé adapted to preserve his rule.¹³ He secured further con-

¹¹ Osei and Akinocho 2018, 341.

¹² ‘Hundreds Died in Togolese Unrest, UN Says,’ accessed 14 February 2024.

¹³ Osei 2018.

stitutional amendments, extending the term limits of the National Assembly and adding a Senate to dilute the opposition's representation. Notably, these reforms enabled him to potentially remain in office until 2030. Amidst these changes, local elections were held in 2019 – the first in three decades – and largely favoured UNIR-backed candidates.

More recently, Agbékoyomé Kodjo emerged as a formidable opponent in the 2020 presidential elections. Formerly a member of parliament and prime minister under Eyadéma from 2000 to 2002, Kodjo became a vocal critic of the ruling party. He was seen as the candidate most acceptable to the Togolese people, with a realistic chance of unseating President Gnassingbé. However, Gnassingbé claimed a highly questionable victory with 72% of the vote, while Kodjo officially received only 18%. Voter turnout was reported at an unprecedented 77%. The Constitutional Court quickly announced the results within 24 hours of the election, rejecting all appeals. Adding to the repression, Kodjo was stripped of his parliamentary immunity by the National Assembly and arrested in April.

Benin and Togo experienced convoluted political developments in the early 2000s. In Benin, evangelical networks increasingly influenced politics, while controversial constitutional amendments and accusations of democratic backsliding marked the presidencies of Kérékou, Boni Yayi, and Talon. In Togo, a constitutional crisis followed President Eyadéma's death in 2005. Subsequent elections, which consolidated Faure Gnassingbé's rule, were marred by allegations of fraud and violent protests. Simultaneously, higher education systems in both countries underwent significant changes over the last twenty years, with the creation of new public universities and the adoption of the LMD reform.

The Creation of New Public Universities and the Licence-Master-Doctorate (LMD) Reform

The massification of the student population in both Benin and Togo necessitated the creation of a second public university. In Benin, the University of Parakou was established in response to a series of events and problems related to the rapid increase in student numbers at the National University of Benin. Between September 1999 and August 2001, the UNB faced a severe academic crisis that paralysed its operations. Designed to accommodate 3,500 to 4,000 students, UNB's infrastructure was overwhelmed by a student population that grew from fewer than 500 in 1970 to 18,753 in 2000.¹⁴ This surge presented two major problems. Firstly, financing

¹⁴ Université d'Abomey-Calavi 2016, 105.

became critical, requiring 300 billion CFA francs for investment, even as education already made up 25% of the national budget. Secondly, a significant social issue emerged: over 30% of graduates were unemployed.¹⁵

In 2001, amid the UNB crisis, President Kérékou tasked Issifou Takpara with resolving the impasse caused by student and faculty strikes. On 18 September 2001, a landmark reform known as the ‘Takpara-Sossa reform’ established a second national university in Parakou. Takpara, rector of the University of Abomey-Calavi from 2001 to 2003, was largely motivated by UAC’s student overcrowding.¹⁶ The University of Parakou officially opened at the start of the 2001–02 academic year, and in October 2002, the two national universities held their first joint academic term.

Even with the establishment of Université d’Agriculture de Kétou (UAK) in 2013, the Université Nationale des Sciences, Technologies, Ingénierie et Mathématiques (UNSTIM)¹⁷ in Abomey in 2014, and the expansion of higher education centres, the issue of excessive student numbers persisted. In May 2015, the Council of Ministers created three additional universities, including the University of Porto-Novo and the University of Lokossa, both offshoots of UAC.¹⁸ Although these initiatives aimed to alleviate congestion, UAC’s student body continued to swell, increasing from 58,000 in 2005 to 119,509 in 2010.¹⁹ Recently, however, the numbers have stabilised, declining to 96,000 for the 2021–22 academic year.²⁰

In Togo, the 2000–01 academic year was also marked by serious disturbances on the Lomé campus. In March 2000, violent clashes occurred when students from the *Conseil des Étudiants de l’Université du Bénin* (Benin University Student Council, CEUB) attempted to disrupt classes. This confrontation resulted in one death and two serious injuries.²¹ As in the 1990s, student protests erupted, demanding scholarship payments and improved living conditions. These strikes and riots eventually led to the cancellation of the academic year in several faculties.²² To address the severe crisis at the University of Lomé, which faced infrastructure shortages, housing, food, and transport issues, along with 16 months of arrears in student scholarships, President Eyadéma organised a meeting with student leaders and

15 *Ibid.*, 111.

16 Hounzandji 2017, 420–21.

17 Formerly the Université Polytechnique d’Abomey.

18 Université d’Abomey-Calavi 2016, 58.

19 *Ibid.*, 74–75.

20 Mensah, ‘Année académique 2021-2022...’, *24h au Bénin*, 29 November 2022.

21 ‘Des perturbations de cours font...’, *Togo-Presse*, 28 March 2000.

22 Ekpawou, ‘Le ministre Sama invite les...’, *Togo-Presse*, 24 September 2001.

faculty on campus in May 2001. This marked his first visit to the university since its inauguration in 1970.²³

In October, the university's rector highlighted that tuition fees and related charges had remained unchanged for over 30 years. He pointed out Togo's economic downturn, reflecting trends in other African countries, particularly the devaluation of the CFA franc and the escalating cost of essential services such as transport, accommodation, and food. Rector Johnson also noted the significant increase in student numbers, further straining the university's resources. He emphasised the inadequacy of government subsidies to meet operational needs, compounded by the institution's limited internal financial resources.²⁴

These challenges underscored the urgent need for reform and increased investment in Togo's higher education sector. To address the growing demand for higher education and expand educational opportunities in the northern region, the University of Kara (UK) was established by presidential decree in January 1999. The university officially opened in January 2004, initially enrolling around 1,500 students across twenty faculties and three departments.²⁵ At the inauguration ceremony, Prime Minister Koffi Sama emphasised the crucial role of higher education in national development: 'The training of cadres capable of thinking about national development cannot take place outside the structures of higher education. [...] Originally designed to accommodate a maximum of 6,000 students, the UL now welcomes more than twice that number.'²⁶

Like its counterpart in Lomé, UK has experienced significant politicisation. In February 2004, *Togo-Presse* reported on a demonstration in Pya by UK students who expressed their gratitude to President Eyadéma and denounced strikes, divisions, and political manipulation on their campus. They criticised the University of Lomé for deviating from its core educational mission, accusing it of becoming a battleground for manipulation by leaders of the 'radical opposition'.²⁷ Concurrently, the private press reported allegations against the UK administration, including unfair dismissals of faculty deans, the detention of several professors, and accusations of sectarianism, discrimination, and regionalism. These reports suggested a policy of exclusion by President Eyadéma that favoured UK,²⁸ highlighting the complex and often turbulent intersection of higher education and politics in Togo.

23 Adjosse, 'Hier sur le campus...', *Togo-Presse*, 16 May 2001; Yéléwê, 'Université de Lomé: la crise...', *La Dépêche*, 30 May 2001.

24 Djamie, 'Université de Lomé / Révision des...', *Togo-Presse*, 1 October 2001.

25 'Kozah: l'Université de Kara bénéficie...', *Togo-Presse*, 8 November 2004.

26 'Le Premier Ministre Koffi Sama...', *Togo-Presse*, 26 January 2004.

27 N'Bouke, 'Les étudiants de l'Université de Kara...', *Togo-Presse*, 16 February 2004.

28 ATOP, 'Kozah/Allégations de la presse privée...', *Togo-Presse*, 27 February 2004.

The higher education landscape in Benin and Togo has also been significantly reshaped by globalisation and market forces, evidenced by increased international exchanges and mobility of students and academics. These countries have adopted liberal economic models in the education sector, integrating private sector interests with academic and scientific objectives. This integration promotes the global dissemination of the latest pedagogical techniques, academic frameworks, and higher standards of excellence. Consequently, both public and private higher education institutions are increasingly subject to market-driven principles, prioritising profitability and competitiveness. This development stems not only from national initiatives but is also strongly influenced by the policies and strategic guidelines of international bodies and government agencies.²⁹

In the 2000s, a significant transformation aligned with this global trend towards international educational standards began with the adoption of the LMD reform. This change is part of a broader movement initiated by the 1999 Bologna Declaration, which launched the Bologna Process aimed at harmonising higher education systems across Europe. The objectives of this extensive reform include standardising degree structures to enhance readability and comparability across borders, introducing a credit system, and facilitating the mobility of students and professors. Central to these efforts is the integration of the LMD system, a key component of the Bologna framework. The LMD reform mirrors the Bologna structure, introducing a three-tier system of study: a bachelor's degree (3 years), a master's degree (2 years), and a doctorate (3 years).

In 2005, seven francophone West African universities formed a network to integrate into the LMD system and manage the reform process more effectively. This consortium included two universities from Benin (Abomey-Calavi and Parakou), two from Togo (Lomé and Kara), and three from Burkina Faso. The formal agreement establishing this network was signed at the University of Lomé by the presidents of the participating universities. Beyond facilitating the adoption of the LMD system, this collaborative effort aimed to strengthen links between African universities and build bridges with institutions in the northern hemisphere, thereby enhancing academic exchange and collaboration.³⁰ Further endorsing regional education reform, the *Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement Supérieur* (CAMES) Council of Ministers recommended in April 2006 that reforms be pursued in line with the principles of the Bologna Process.

The preparatory phase for the integration of the LMD system into Togolese higher education began in 2005, with effective implementation beginning in the

²⁹ Wagner, Leclerc-Olive and Ghellab 2011.

³⁰ Sékou, 'Modernisation de l'enseignement...', *Togo-Presse*, 13 October 2005.

2008–09 academic year. This transition was formalised by Decree No. 2008–066/PR, adopted by the Council of Ministers on 21 July 2008. The decree outlined several key objectives for the LMD system’s implementation, aimed at improving the structure and delivery of higher education in Togo. These included enhancing the transparency and comparability of degrees, increasing the attractiveness and credibility of educational offerings, and professionalising higher education. Additional goals were integrating transversal competencies such as language and computer skills, adopting effective teaching and assessment methods, potentially involving information and communication technologies, recognising and validating prior learning, and facilitating the mobility of professors regionally, across Africa, and internationally.³¹ Before the LMD system, Togo’s public universities followed a three-cycle system: general university diplomas (I and II) and the bachelor’s degree; a second cycle leading to a master’s degree; and a third cycle focused on DEA and doctoral training.

Three years after its introduction, the LMD system in Togo faced significant challenges, according to *Togo-Presse*. Both students and some university professors struggled to fully understand and effectively implement the new model.³² In 2011, the General Secretary of the *Syndicat National des Enseignants du Supérieur* (National Union of Higher Education Professors, SNES) identified significant obstacles to implementation, highlighting widespread shortcomings in administrative, pedagogical, material, and human dimensions.³³ Aléza further elaborated on the implications of the reform, noting that while the LMD system aimed to streamline educational processes, it inadvertently exacerbated problems related to course organisation, programme structuring, and curriculum development. Additionally, the reform increased the demand for physical and financial resources to support higher education institutions. Concerns were also raised about students’ access to essential services and resources, including scholarships, loans, new information and communication technologies, modern library facilities, public transport, catering, accommodation, leisure activities, and social health services.³⁴

Against this backdrop of growing dissatisfaction, the UL experienced significant student unrest and violence in May 2011, primarily over issues related to the implementation of the LMD system and scholarship concerns. These demonstrations led to the temporary closure of the campus.³⁵ In June, the government initiated a

31 Kataka, ‘Réforme dans l’enseignement supérieur...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 12 December 2008.

32 Edjeou, ‘Méthodologies et enjeux du...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 28 January 2011.

33 Teyi, ‘Enseignement supérieur: le SNES...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 27 September 2011.

34 Aléza 2021, 40.

35 Agama, ‘Mouvement de protestation estudiantine...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 27 May 2011.

meeting at the Prime Minister's office, attended by University of Lomé authorities and representatives of the student unions, to resolve the issues that prompted the university's closure. During this meeting, student representatives unanimously supported the LMD system. However, they stressed the need to address student concerns during the transition from the previous system to the LMD framework. In addition, the representatives expressed worries that diplomas awarded under the former system might not offer the same career prospects as the new diplomas.³⁶

In Benin, the LMD system has been formalised through various legal texts, including decrees, ministerial orders, and rectoral directives. Notably, Decree 2010-272 of 11 June 2010 set out a comprehensive agenda for the integration of the LMD system. Its primary objective was the professionalisation of higher education, aiming to align academic offerings with the evolving needs of the labour market and continuing education requirements. It emphasised the importance of recognising experiential learning and professional achievements in collaboration with broader economic and social sectors. The decree also mandated the inclusion of key transversal competencies in the curriculum, particularly foreign language skills and digital literacy. Another crucial objective was to enhance the comparability and equivalence of diplomas issued by Beninese higher education institutions. The decree also sought to improve the regional, continental, and international mobility of professors and researchers. Collectively, these measures were designed not only to bring Benin's higher education system into line with international standards but also to address specific educational and professional challenges within the country.³⁷

Benin's introduction of the LMD system, similar to Togo's, has faced significant challenges, necessitating major administrative and pedagogical reforms, updating teaching methods, and managing a burgeoning student population. One critical issue is the inadequate infrastructure and unbalanced teacher-student ratio, which is further exacerbated by most professors lacking formal training in pedagogical techniques. Moreover, students have struggled to adapt to the semester-based structure and credit system of the LMD system, which differs significantly from the country's previous framework.³⁸ A recent study of the Haute Ecole de Commerce et de Management (School of Business and Management, HECM) in Abomey-Calavi found that, despite the LMD reform, teaching and learning approaches at HECM remain predominantly traditional.³⁹ The implementation of the LMD system varies considerably across institutions, influenced by factors such as their public or

³⁶ Teyi, 'Règlement de la crise à l'Université...', *Togo-Presse*, 7 June 2011.

³⁷ Université d'Abomey-Calavi 2016, 177–78.

³⁸ Bah 2022.

³⁹ Akakpo, Houessou and Boko 2021.

private status, financial and organisational capacity, and responses to the reform. As a result, institutions must strike a balance between meeting international standards and addressing the specific needs and realities of the local context.⁴⁰

The challenges and opportunities of implementing the LMD system in Francophone African universities have been the subject of numerous studies.⁴¹ While acknowledging the potential benefits of the LMD system for improving the quality, relevance, and mobility of higher education in Africa, Nyamba has highlighted the difficulties and risks of adopting this system without addressing the structural problems and specificities of African universities. These issues include lack of funding, infrastructure, qualified staff, documentation and research, as well as a disconnect between the education system and local development needs. Additionally, poor management and planning, social and political instability, and the emergence of private actors with questionable quality and motives further complicate the successful implementation of the LMD system.⁴²

In summary, the adoption of the LMD system in Benin and Togo was not merely a superficial restructuring of higher education. It was a concerted effort to address the growing disconnect between university education and the practical skills and knowledge demanded by the labour market and society at large. In both countries, the LMD reform emphasised the professionalisation of higher education, aiming to align academic offerings with the evolving needs of the economy and the expectations of employers. Beyond restructuring degree programmes, the LMD reform sought to integrate transversal competencies into the curriculum, such as language proficiency, digital literacy, and entrepreneurial skills. However, implementing these skill-oriented aspects of the LMD reform faced significant challenges in both countries.

Amidst this landscape of political upheaval and higher education reforms in Benin and Togo, faith-based student associations continued to thrive and expand their activities on university campuses. Building on the momentum of the previous decade, these groups sought to further integrate faith with intellectual and social engagement, broadening their focus beyond traditional religious functions to address contemporary issues facing students. In many ways, the 2000s represented a 'golden age' for religious activism at the Universities of Lomé and Abomey-Calavi.

⁴⁰ Éyébiyi 2011.

⁴¹ Charlier, Croché and Ndoye 2009.

⁴² Nyamba 2014.

5.2 The 'Golden Age' of Faith-Based Student Associations

This section explores the evolving roles and activities of faith-based student associations on university campuses since the 2000s. It analyses how these groups have adapted to meet students' practical, social, and moral needs while navigating tensions within their faith communities. Building on the previous decade's momentum, Christian and Muslim student associations have been crucial in orienting new students to university life, offering guidance on academic and personal matters. They have also fostered social connections and facilitated marital relationships among members. In response to anxieties about moral dissolution on campus, these groups have emphasised moral discipline and spiritual guidance.

Muslim student associations have worked to counter misconceptions about Islam, especially following the events of 11 September 2001, and to empower Muslim women through educational initiatives. They have also engaged in regional collaborations to address broader social and religious issues. Meanwhile, the Christian landscape on campus has seen a proliferation of groups and movements, including Catholic charismatic renewal and Seventh-day Adventist initiatives focused on health and well-being. The rising influence of Salafism among Muslim students has led to doctrinal tensions within associations, although recent years have seen a softening of rigid Salafi exclusivism, allowing Islamic associations to maintain their unity.

Religious Activities on Campus and Beyond: Balancing Faith and Intellectual Life

The current General Secretary of the GBEEB provided insightful details of the supportive role of faith-based associations in assisting new students with practical aspects of university life beyond the religious sphere. He noted that many students do not engage in associative life until university, often motivated by the need to integrate into a social network and benefit from support. This need is widely recognised, not only by religious organisations but also by various student associations and cultural groups on campus, which often organise welcome events for new students. The activities of GBEEB are particularly notable for their practical support for newcomers, including assistance with academic enrolment procedures and finding accommodation. This support is especially valuable for students from distant regions with no local or family ties. In this way, the GBEEB addresses fundamental social, financial, and material needs, fostering friendships and social integration. This approach, termed 'evangelisation through friendship', extends beyond the traditional religious framework. It aims primarily to meet immediate

practical needs while providing a space for personal religious exploration, facilitating meaningful engagement with spirituality.⁴³

Faith-based groups on campus play a crucial role in fostering personal relationships, particularly in facilitating marital relationships. They act as informal conduits, bringing together individuals with similar values and aspirations. This function is deeply embedded in the social curricula of both Islamic and Christian student organisations. For many members, the search for a future spouse is closely linked to their spiritual and moral goals. These groups promote marriage as an integral part of moral and sexual responsibility, providing a supportive environment for forming relationships with like-minded partners. For many members of the '*Groupe Biblique Universitaire*' in Benin, the acronym GBU stands for '*Groupe de Bonne Union*' ('Good Union Group'), reflecting the high number of marriages between group members over the years. It was at GBEEB that Ahoga, a former general secretary of the association, met his wife.⁴⁴ A similar dynamic can be observed at AEEMT.⁴⁵ In West Africa, where economic challenges hinder young people's path to marriage, faith-based organisations are adapting in innovative ways. Confronted with unemployment and financial hardship, Islamic and Christian groups across the region now offer dating services to help young adults overcome economic barriers to finding suitable partners.⁴⁶

Amid urban anxieties and fears of immorality prevalent in large cities, faith-based student associations provide moral guidance. Aware of various temptations such as idleness, drinking, sexual promiscuity, and smoking, these groups stress the need for the moral protection of students. Religious associations offer not only spiritual guidance but also a framework of moral discipline, acting as a social safety net for students perceived as spiritually vulnerable and at risk. The GBEEB website states: 'Our involvement with students is aimed at winning back lost souls and reorienting young people to core human values and Christ. Young students are losing their way these days and that's very worrying when you consider that the future of the country depends on them.'⁴⁷ This moral focus is exemplified by one of GBEEB's flagship activities in the early 2000s, the '*Vie pour Vie*' ('Life for Life') initiative. Launched in partnership with the Rectorate of the University of Abomey-Calavi, this project distributed 20,000 New Testaments and Bibles to the

⁴³ Hake Chabi Assa, Fabrice Hounkpevi and Angelo Klanclounon, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 March 2022.

⁴⁴ Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

⁴⁵ Nadia Kondo, Aziz Gountante and Ouro Bagna, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 17 August 2021.

⁴⁶ Janson 2018.

⁴⁷ 'Le GBEEB, un mouvement en mission,' accessed 13 February 2020.

university community, responding to the HIV/AIDS crisis by promoting morality and abstinence as preventive measures. GBEEB's strategy emphasised the need for moral and spiritual support to encourage abstinence and uphold moral standards among students.⁴⁸

As Agble, the current president of the GBEEB National Student Executive Board, explains, the GBEEB actively promotes moral values among students. The organisation recognises that students spend most of their time at school rather than at home, making them significantly influenced by their peers and the campus environment. This environment, bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds, complicates the maintenance of consistent moral standards. Even well-educated children can quickly adopt undesirable behaviours by imitating their peers at university. While parents may instil strong values at home, contrasting influences at school can undermine this upbringing. For this reason, the GBEEB emphasises the actions and involvement of the students themselves, rather than external figures such as pastors or professionals. These external figures, although well-intentioned, do not fully understand the daily lives and challenges of the students. GBEEB underscores that peer influence is most effective when it comes from within the student body. Fellow students of the same generation, sharing similar experiences, can communicate more openly and effectively. They understand each other's struggles and can offer genuine support. This peer-led approach ensures that moral guidance is relatable and effective. This initiative helps maintain moral integrity by reinforcing positive behaviours and providing a counterbalance to the potentially harmful influences that students encounter on campus.⁴⁹

As in the 1990s, Muslim students on campus in the early 2000s made considerable efforts to explain the 'true' nature of Islam to both Muslim and non-Muslim students, particularly in Togo. The AEEMT offered numerous training sessions to help students better interact and debate with non-Muslims, addressing common criticisms of Islam.⁵⁰ This was especially important in the aftermath of 9/11, when accusations of 'integrism' (*intégrisme*) and 'fundamentalism' (*fondamentalisme*) were rampant, according to the Amir of the AEEMT.⁵¹ These initiatives aimed to promote an evidence-based understanding of Islam among members, enabling them to effectively counter prejudices and misconceptions. The sessions focused on dismantling flawed perceptions that unfairly label Muslims as 'barbaric', 'violent', 'extremist', or 'radical'. Both male and female Muslim students faced significant

48 Jacob Djossou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 19 March 2022.

49 Adolphine Agble, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 8 March 2022.

50 Taofik Bonfoh, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

51 ATOP, 'Kloto: les Elèves et Étudiants...', *Togo-Presse*, 5 August 2003.

prejudice on campus. Women were often judged because of the veil, while male students, particularly those with beards or caps, were sometimes pejoratively called 'Ben Laden'. These biases extended beyond the student body, with some faculty members calling for the removal of Islamic clothing and professors making insensitive remarks about Islamic figures in history classes, particularly regarding Aisha's age at the time of her marriage to the Prophet.⁵²

To counteract these prejudices, AEEMT leaders organised the annual Cultural Week of the Muslim. This event serves as a platform to change mindsets and showcase the true nature of Islam as a religion of peace. For instance, in his opening speech for the 2003 edition, Imam Sani Karim highlighted the challenge for Muslim youth to demonstrate that Islam is not a barbaric religion that advocates war and terrorism.⁵³ Following the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoon controversy in 2005, a press conference was held at the University of Lomé mosque to address what the Muslim community described as a provocative act. In his address, Imam Sani Karim insisted that the Prophet Muhammad was neither a terrorist nor a violent figure. He stated: 'Islam is a universal religion, and opinion leaders and journalists must understand that Islam is the opposite of war, robbery, banditry, and violence. They must stop confusing politics with religion or, better still, Islam with terrorism.'⁵⁴

In their broader efforts to combat prejudice and misconceptions about Islam, Muslim student associations have recognised the unique challenges faced by Muslim women in contemporary society. Since the 2000s, they have proactively created platforms for empowerment and education, addressing the specific needs of women within the Islamic community and ensuring their active participation in both religious and societal contexts. These initiatives in Benin and Togo reflect broader regional dynamics of Muslim women's engagement in student associations across West Africa. Recent studies highlight the diverse experiences of Muslim women as they navigate their identities and roles within these organisations. In Burkina Faso, young Muslim women, often referred to as 'Adja', adopt the veil as a conscious expression of piety and identity, positioning conservative dress as a symbol of defiance and negotiation within a predominantly Muslim but secular society.⁵⁵ Similarly, in Côte d'Ivoire, female AEEMCI activists have moved beyond marginal roles to challenge local customs and traditions, empowering themselves

52 Taofik Bonfoh, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

53 Pouh, 'De la responsabilité du jeune...', *Togo-Presse*, 24 April 2003.

54 Kamazina, 'Caricatures du prophète Mouhammad...', *Togo-Presse*, 14 February 2006.

55 Ouedraogo 2019.

and others through interpretations of 'true' Islam that focus on self-fulfilment, financial autonomy, and career opportunities.⁵⁶

In Benin, the *Journée de l'Élève et de l'Étudiante Musulmane du Bénin* (Benin Female Muslim Pupils' and Students' Day, JEEM), established in 2002, exemplifies these efforts. This annual event, dedicated to Muslim women in Benin, particularly those in ACEEMUB, aims to raise awareness about their rights and responsibilities. Each year, JEEM revolves around a chosen theme, tackling issues related to women's status in society and contributing to their religious, socio-professional, and personal development. The event attracts participants from various regions of Benin and neighbouring countries.⁵⁷

Togo's AEEMT has taken similar steps, actively celebrating International Women's Day every March with events empowering young Muslim women and educating them about Islam. In 2002, the Women's Cell of the AEEMT hosted a conference at the University of Lomé on 'The role of Muslim women in facing contemporary challenges', covering topics such as sex education in Islam and HIV/AIDS prevention.⁵⁸ A 2003 debate at the university further explored themes of Muslim women's identity and the legal recognition of veiling, emphasising Islam's balanced perspective on gender roles and critiquing media portrayals of Muslim women. Drawing parallels with the wearing of the cross in Christianity, the speaker emphasised the veil's alignment with Qur'anic teachings and cited cases of Muslim students being expelled for their attire, calling for a comprehensive legal review.⁵⁹

These initiatives echo efforts in other West African countries. In northern Nigeria, the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN) has established programmes like the Sisters' Circle and Marriage Guidance and Counselling, empowering Muslim women to actively participate in public life, influence their careers, and challenge societal norms.⁶⁰ In Senegal, Muslim female students' religious practices, such as veiling and prayer, significantly define their identities and university environments amidst uncertainties about their academic and professional futures.⁶¹ The AEEMT's biennial *Séminaire islamique de formation des sœurs* (Islamic Seminar for Sisters' Training) provides a dedicated forum for sisters to discuss issues of particular concern, further illustrating the trend towards creating spaces for Muslim women's empowerment within student associations.⁶²

56 Madore 2020b.

57 'Journée de l'Élève et de l'Étudiante Musulmanes du Bénin,' accessed 25 August 2019.

58 Blande, 'Lutte contre le VIH/SIDA...', *Togo-Presse*, 5 March 2002.

59 Lemou, 'L'AEEMT pour une identité...', *Togo-Presse*, 4 March 2003.

60 Balogun 2023.

61 Amo 2022.

62 Ibrahima Ouro-Gouni, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 August 2021.

The focus on women's empowerment is just one facet of the expanding scope of Christian and Muslim student associations in Togo and Benin. These groups have increasingly engaged in regional activities, fostering cross-border cooperation and dialogue on a wide range of issues affecting young Muslims and Christians across West Africa. For instance, in 2001, the AEEMT hosted its national Islamic training seminar in Mango, themed 'Islam as a factor for peace and development'. This event drew 250 participants from Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, facilitating discussions on various topics, including 'Islamic work and conversion in schools and universities'.⁶³ Building on this spirit of regional cooperation, ACEEMUB and AEEMT jointly organised the *Festival Culturel de la Jeunesse Musulmane de l'Afrique de l'Ouest* (West African Muslim Youth Cultural Festival) in Cotonou in August 2005. The festival on 'Art and Islamic culture: a tool for peace and integration', aimed to educate participants about Islam's rich cultural and artistic heritage beyond its religious aspects. It also sought to promote peace by addressing and countering racism and ethnocentrism. Debates covered topics such as 'The Muslim in the context of secularism', 'The code of the person and the family in the Republic of Benin', and 'Overview and impact on the life of the Muslim and international Islamic news'. Participants hailed from Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo, and Benin.⁶⁴

The *Organisation de la Jeunesse Musulmane en Afrique de l'Ouest* (Organisation of Muslim Youth in West Africa, OJEMAO),⁶⁵ of which ACEEMUB and AEEMT are members, has significantly contributed to cross-border cooperation among West African Muslim student associations. Founded in 1993 in Orodara, Burkina Faso, OJEMAO is a sub-regional organisation comprising some twenty associations from eight countries: Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Senegal. Its creation was driven by the need to address the impact of globalisation and to promote a unified Islamic identity across the region.⁶⁶ In 2008, the AEEMT played a key role in organising the sixth ordinary general assembly of OJEMAO in Lomé, centred on 'Contemporary Islamic thought: currents and characteristics'. During this assembly, AEEM delegates from ten West African countries deepened their understanding of contemporary Islamic currents and received training in association management.⁶⁷

63 ATOP, 'Oti: les élèves et étudiants....', *Togo-Presse*, 11 September 2001.

64 Ibrahima Ouro-Gouni, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 August 2021; Tchomakou 2005; Ali 2005.

65 <https://www.ojemao.org/>.

66 Bagayago, 'O.J.E.M.A.O.: le congrès....', *L'Appel*, January 1998, 4.

67 Boukari, 'Les jeunes musulmans ouest-africains....', *Togo-Presse*, 7 August 2008; Pitassa, 'La jeunesse musulmane ouest-africaine....', *Togo-Presse*, 9 August 2008.

Bible groups in Togo and Benin have also engaged in regional initiatives. In 2013, the GBUST hosted the third Pan-African Conference of the GBUAF in Lomé. Themed 'Grasping and serving God's purposes in a continent on the move', the conference featured twelve workshops led by speakers from across West and Central Africa. Topics included 'Development issues in Africa and God's purposes', 'ICT and evangelism', 'Serving God's purposes on campus', and 'What leadership for the Church in this Africa.'⁶⁸ Continuing this tradition of regional dialogue, the GBEEB organised the fifth GBUAF conference in Abomey-Calavi in 2019. The event's theme, 'GBU and Development in Africa: Prospects for a convincing and relevant presence in Francophone universities?', spurred discussions on 'the university in God's plan for the nations', emphasising the need for student Bible groups to engage with all academic community levels to promote Christ's reign. This stance against a dichotomy between faith and intellectual life underscores the Bible Group's vision for an integrated approach to Christian witness and academic excellence.⁶⁹

In summary, faith-based student associations have actively addressed students' practical needs, promoted moral guidance, and fostered meaningful relationships on campus. These groups have also engaged in regional initiatives to encourage interfaith dialogue and tackle contemporary challenges faced by religious communities. While these efforts have enriched the religious landscape on campus, the 2000s witnessed a significant proliferation of Christian actors and groups, enhancing the diversity of spiritual activities available to students.

A Proliferation of Christian Actors and Groups on Campuses

Since the 2000s, the campuses of Abomey-Calavi and Lomé have seen the emergence of various Christian student groups, supplementing the activities of Bible groups and the JEC. In Benin, alongside the JEC, the Emmaüs community continues to play an important role in the spiritual life of Catholic students through the celebration of mass and a special catechetical programme. According to the university chaplain, Emmaüs recognised that while students are intellectually capable, they often lack a profound understanding of their faith. To address this, they developed a bespoke catechetical programme spanning three years. The first year offers a classical introduction to the faith; the second year focuses on direct worship linked to the sacraments of baptism and communion; and the third year provides specific

⁶⁸ 'Événement: compte à rebours / Panafricaine 2013,' accessed 18 August 2023.

⁶⁹ Tossoukpe, 'La conférence Panafricaine: que retenir des 4 sessions?,' accessed 10 August 2022.

training for confirmation, guiding students towards mature Christian adulthood.⁷⁰ In addition, Emmaüs organises an annual pilgrimage to the sanctuary of *Notre Dame de la divine miséricorde* (Our Lady of Divine Mercy) in Allada. This event, which gathers Catholic students from the UAC and other higher education institutions in Cotonou, offers an opportunity for spiritual renewal and discussion of the diocese's pastoral theme of the year. For example, the 2019 pilgrimage centred on the theme 'Living fraternal communion in the Church, the family of God', facilitating teachings and discussions that encouraged participants to deepen their faith. During the two-day event, Father Ephrem Cyprien Houndje urged pilgrims to immerse themselves in prayer and meditation, placing their trials in the hands of God through the intercession of the Virgin Mary.⁷¹

The Charismatic Renewal movement has gained significant traction in southern Benin, responding to Pentecostalism in a manner consistent with Catholic traditions. Characterised by emotional worship and a focus on the transformative influence of the Holy Spirit, the movement offers a structured way for Catholics to engage in practices and rhetoric reminiscent of Pentecostal congregations, but within the Catholic Church's framework.⁷² At UAC, the Charismatic Renewal is part of Emmaüs, which encompasses various groups such as choirs and religious study circles. Pacôme Elet, a prominent figure in the JEC in the 1980s, succeeded Jean Pliya as national leader of the Charismatic Renewal in Benin. Elet also serves as the national coordinator for Charis, an initiative of Pope Francis to unite six charismatic expressions under national coordination to harmonise life in the Holy Spirit and charismatic experiences. This position places him at the forefront of coordinating activities related to the Holy Spirit, evangelisation, prayer for healing, liberation, and deliverance within the Catholic lay community in Benin.⁷³ The movement's presence on campus is underscored by the appointment of its own shepherd.⁷⁴

In Togo, the *Jeunesse Etudiante Adventiste du Togo* (JEAT) is relatively active on campus and has organised several health-related activities. The Adventist Church has been officially established in the country since 1964,⁷⁵ with Lomé hosting the headquarters of the Eastern Sahel Mission Union of the Adventist Church. Although it operated unofficially for some time, JEAT was officially recognised in 2014 and granted permission to operate on the University of Lomé campus.⁷⁶ By 2019, JEAT

70 Ephrem Cyprien Houndje, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 14 March 2022.

71 Hlannon, 'Au Bénin, 10e pèlerinage de l'aumônerie...', *La Croix Africa*, 1 April 2019.

72 Mayrargue 2014, 105.

73 Pacôme Elet, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

74 Jude Toho, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 13 March 2022.

75 'Nos origines,' accessed 19 December 2023.

76 Kevin Folly, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 31 August 2021.

had grown to around 125 members at UL. It actively engages in health promotion and prevention activities, often in collaboration with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), the global humanitarian organisation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. They organise a comprehensive health programme in which participants undergo assessments at eight different stations, collecting data to determine their biological age. These stations include a 'temperance' station, which discusses moderation in using substances such as tobacco and alcohol. The final station, 'Trust in God', offers spiritual encouragement and affirms faith in divine healing. Besides health assessments, JEAT emphasises the value of physical activity by organising annual football tournaments on campus. These initiatives reflect the Church's emphasis not only on physical well-being but also on holistic health, integrating physical, nutritional, and spiritual elements to promote the students' overall well-being.⁷⁷

In contrast to Christians, whose associations and groups have proliferated, there are still only two Muslim student associations, one in Lomé and one in Abomey-Calavi. Despite their efforts to unite Muslims of all Islamic persuasions, both AEEMT and ACEEMUB have faced internal tensions, particularly due to the rising popularity of Salafism among students in the 2000s.

Rise and Decline of Salafism on Campuses

The appeal of Salafism among Muslim students on the Lomé campus led to internal divisions. 'Salafism', a term encompassing a wide range of interpretations and practices in the African context, differs significantly from the notion of a uniform movement imposed from outside. Salafism emerges as a dynamic phenomenon, shaped by local actors and realities.⁷⁸ For clarity, this discussion uses a broad definition of 'Salafi' to refer to non-Sufi reformers committed to social transformation. Salafism's modernist discourse resonates strongly with many students and professors, attracting them to its reformist and contemporary approach to Islam.

From 2000 to 2004, the AEEMT faced attempts by Shia members to gain influence through significant financial contributions amid ongoing leadership disputes within the association. However, the 'Sunnah had already taken root in the AEEMT', particularly due to the training from the Islamic NGO Al-Muntadah, which effectively thwarted these efforts.⁷⁹ According to the Amir of the AEEMT from 2004

⁷⁷ Valdo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

⁷⁸ Østebø 2021.

⁷⁹ Ikilil Adjama, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 17 August 2021.

to 2006, the leadership was aware of the internal tensions caused by different doctrinal tendencies in other Muslim student associations in West Africa,⁸⁰ most notably the split within the AEEMCI in Côte d'Ivoire, leading to the creation of two new Salafi student associations.⁸¹ In response, the AEEMT took deliberate steps to ensure that leadership roles were reserved for individuals solely committed to the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, excluding members of groups such as the Tijanis and Tabligh. While the university mosque remains open to Muslims of all persuasions for prayer, promoting or displaying any particular doctrinal practice within the AEEMT is expressly prohibited.⁸²

In 2006, an 'Islamic Ethics Awareness Committee' spearheaded weekly campus activities, including a notable conference debate in April at the AEEMT mosque on the controversial topic of celebrating the Prophet's birth (*mawlid*). The speaker argued that 'at a time when the detractors of Islam have no shortage of strategies' and 'out of concern for Islamic cohesion', 'it is preferable to confine ourselves strictly to the recommendations of the Prophet himself', labelling the *mawlid* as 'nothing more and nothing less than an innovation'.⁸³ This stance reflected the growing influence of Salafism within the AEEMT, culminating in the election of Ikilil Adjama as Amir from 2008 to 2010. A native of Sokodé and involved with the AEEMT since his student days in 1996, Adjama began his university studies at the University of Lomé in 2002. He served on the national board before becoming imam in charge of leading pre-sermons at the university mosque, where he emphasised restoring the *Aqidah*, or creed, to address the perceived laxity ('*laxisme*') and 'crisis of faith' within the association. During his term, he 'advocated *Aqidah*, the firm belief in God, faith, what we call effort in the path of Allah. [...] And to bring back the pure Sunnah.'⁸⁴ Critical of the imitation of activities and practices of sister associations such as the AEEMB and AEEMCI, including choir groups, Adjama disbanded the AEEMT choir, founded in 2006, leading to accusations of extremism and earning the pejorative label of 'haramist Amir' for allegedly considering too many practices to be haram.⁸⁵

In Benin, the 1990s saw the rise of fundamentalist movements such as the Tablighi Jama'at and the Ahmadiyya.⁸⁶ This period also witnessed the emergence of Wahhabi and Salafi movements, particularly in the northern regions of Parakou,

80 Ibrahima Ouro-Gouni, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 August 2021.

81 Madore and Binaté 2023.

82 Ibrahima Ouro-Gouni, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 August 2021.

83 'Conférence-débat au siège de l'AEEMT,' *Le Rendez-Vous*, 28 April 2006, 3.

84 Ikilil Adjama, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 17 August 2021.

85 Ibid.

86 Brégand 2007.

Djougou, and Malanville, identifying themselves as *'Ahl al-Sunna'* or 'People of Tradition'. These developments paralleled trends in Maradi, Niger, and northern Nigeria, where movements like Yan Izala gained momentum. Beninese students returning from Arab universities played a key role in spreading this doctrine and significantly impacted these cities.⁸⁷ Financially supported by Saudi and Kuwaiti NGOs, they established educational and religious institutions and became deeply involved in the religious and social life of these communities.⁸⁸ They sought to influence the Muslim community by occupying imam positions within mosques. Where control of existing mosques was unattainable, they initiated their own, starting in temporary shelters while raising funds for mosque construction. Although not excluded from mosques led by traditionalist imams, these movements preferred to establish new Islamic spaces for preaching, debate, and teaching, creating distinct communities within the broader Islamic tradition.⁸⁹

In Cotonou, unlike in northern cities such as Malanville, the presence of *Ahl al-Sunna* groups is less visible. However, Imam Mohamed el-Habib Ibrahim has emerged as an important figure in the reformist Islamic landscape of southern Benin, particularly among university students. His influential role has contributed to the growing appeal of Salafism on campus. After studying in Kuwait, el-Habib returned to Cotonou in 1995. In 1999, he was appointed imam of the new Zongo Central Mosque in Cotonou, a project largely funded by the national Muslim community at an estimated cost of two billion CFA francs.⁹⁰ El-Habib succeeded his ailing father, Malam Yaro (c. 1913–2002), a renowned sheikh of the Niassene Tijaniyya. Despite opposition from his father's followers, el-Habib's reformist stance on Islam gradually attracted a diverse audience, including Muslim youth and Western-educated cadres. In 2000, el-Habib mobilised local Muslim businessmen to raise the funds needed to launch Cotonou's first Islamic radio station, *La Voix de l'Islam* (The Voice of Islam).⁹¹ Broadcasting from the mosque in several languages, including Arabic and French, the station has become an important channel for promoting reformist Islamic teachings. Benin's geographical proximity to Nigeria has enabled the station to feature preachers fluent in Yoruba and Hausa.⁹²

However, it was mainly regional and personal rivalries between individuals that significantly affected the ACEEMUB, particularly during its national congress

⁸⁷ Abdoulaye 2007, 217–31.

⁸⁸ Brégand 1997; 1999.

⁸⁹ Brégand 2012, 478–79.

⁹⁰ Dohou, 'Inauguration de la mosquée centrale...', *La Nation*, 22 November 1999.

⁹¹ Miran 2005, 52–53; Abdoulaye 2007, 198–99; Brégand 2009.

⁹² In April 2020, the radio station was engulfed in flames due to an electrical short circuit. The fire caused extensive damage. B., 'Incendie à la mosquée de Zongo...', *Matin Libre*, 24 April 2020.

in 2011. Tensions were evident during the election of national executive members, marked by intimidation, threats, and assaults among delegates from Malanville and Kandi. This situation necessitated mediation by local Muslim dignitaries and police intervention.⁹³ An editorial in the ACEEMUB newspaper, *ASSALAM*, lamented the incident:

Unfortunately, some members of ACEEMUB, despite its merits, indulge in blind solidarity to sow discord and disunity. The collective interest should take precedence over personal interests. Instead of focusing on the association's development, 'aceemubist' elements engage in a peculiarly Beninese sport: animosity and destruction. Today's Aceemubist prefer aggression to contradiction. [...] Getting bogged down in Byzantine quarrels leads one to believe that we are ignoring our cardinal objectives.⁹⁴

Since the 2010s, debates among Muslim students in both countries have shifted from outward religious expressions, such as beards and trouser lengths, to issues like economic entrepreneurship, a development detailed in the following section. This shift indicates a growing disinterest in the doctrinal disputes and religious exclusivity that characterised campus life in the 1990s and 2000s. While rivalries persist, there is a trend towards pragmatic concessions and compromises between Salafi leaders and their non-Salafi counterparts. This accommodation reflects a broader trend within West African Salafi movements, many of which have softened their criticism of Sufis and other Muslim groups.⁹⁵ Currently, although more Muslims are influenced by Salafism, there is a noticeable decline in rigid adherence to Salafi exclusivism. Thurston describes this trend as 'soft Salafisation', highlighting a less stringent commitment to Salafi ideals and a reduction in overt criticism of various Islamic practices.⁹⁶ Consequently, Salafism is increasingly viewed as a set of selectively adopted practices and attitudes rather than a rigidly defined identity.

As the higher education landscape in Benin and Togo transformed in the 2000s and 2010s, faith-based student associations adapted to new challenges and opportunities. The mismatch between university education and labour market demands persisted, intensifying students' anxieties about their futures. In response, faith-based groups on campus shifted their focus towards entrepreneurship and practical skills development, recognising the necessity of equipping students with competencies beyond the academic curriculum.

⁹³ 'Rapport du 5ème congrès ordinaire...', *ASSALAM*, October 2011, 8.

⁹⁴ Mohktar Saliou, 'Éditorial: Association Culturelles...', *ASSALAM*, October 2011, 2.

⁹⁵ Sounaye 2015a.

⁹⁶ Thurston 2022; 2018.

5.3 The 'Entrepreneurial Turn' in the Social Curriculum

In both countries, the proliferation of private universities since the 1990s and 2000s, driven by neoliberal reforms, sought to address the limitations of public higher education in managing increasing student enrolments and graduate unemployment. Despite these efforts, the significant mismatch between higher education and labour market demands persisted, further aggravated by the declining quality of education in both public and private institutions. Amidst this backdrop, faith-based student associations have pivoted towards promoting entrepreneurial skills and leadership development among their members. This 'entrepreneurial turn' mirrors a broader trend of religious associations redefining their social roles in response to the socio-economic challenges students face. By emphasising practical skills training and personal empowerment, these associations position themselves as essential resources for navigating the increasingly competitive job market. Simultaneously, they maintain a delicate balance between civic engagement and political neutrality, aiming to contribute to nation-building and the common good while steering clear of partisan entanglements in restricted democratic spaces.

The Proliferation of Private Universities in the Context of Escalating Graduate Unemployment

Since the 1990s, Benin and Togo have witnessed a significant expansion of private higher education institutions. These institutions, driven by market logic, emerged in response to the public sector's failure to offer programmes aligned with labour market needs. In Benin, private higher education institutions have pioneered new mobility and training pathways, focusing on short, career-oriented programmes like the '*Brevet de technicien supérieur*' (BTS) and employing aggressive marketing tactics to attract students. However, these institutions often grapple with challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and uneven teaching quality. While they have played an important role in accommodating the surge in student numbers, their growth has also generated new inequalities in access to education and disparities in knowledge distribution.⁹⁷ Increasingly, students and their families are drawn to private institutions by the promise of better examination results, global recognition, and fewer disruptions compared to public counterparts. However, this

⁹⁷ Eyebiyi 2011.

shift towards private education tends to widen the inequality gap, excluding those unable to afford the high tuition fees.⁹⁸

In 2018, the Beninese government took decisive measures to address the widespread dysfunction within private higher education institutions. A journalist from *La Nation* remarked, 'higher education in certain private institutions has long been a deception to which parents and students have succumbed.'⁹⁹ The government identified 50 such institutions that failed to meet established standards, marking them for closure or suspension. These institutions were notorious for producing graduates ill-prepared for the labour market, starkly contrasting with their lofty claims. A significant issue was the inadequate infrastructure of many private institutions, which operated in substandard facilities and lacked essential equipment. This problem was exacerbated by poor planning, implementation, and monitoring of training programmes and schedules. Promised curricula, often aggressively advertised in the media or detailed in brochures, were implemented haphazardly due to financial constraints and a lack of qualified staff. Consequently, parents and students bore the burden of exorbitant tuition fees.¹⁰⁰

The considerable challenges faced by public universities, characterised by recurrent and often violent crises, underscore systemic management failures and are central to understanding the emergence of private universities and the educational gaps they aim to fill. In Togo, the absence of a coherent and strategic approach to higher education policy has negatively impacted the governance, administration, and management of universities, consequently affecting the quality of education, research, and overall institutional prestige. A prominent trend in Togo's higher education landscape is the emphasis on improving infrastructure at the expense of student learning and skills acquisition. This strategy neglects the critical need for academically prepared students capable of meeting the demands of both public and private sector labour markets.¹⁰¹

An article titled 'The job hunt: an ordeal for graduates,' published in *Togo-Press* in September 2006, highlighted that a growing number of graduates face the harsh reality that higher education does not necessarily guarantee employment: 'Suffering for years before finding a stable job is the daily experience of most young graduates.' The article points out that challenges often begin during the university years, as students receive a meagre 20,000 CFA francs per semester in financial aid, an amount insufficient given the economic strain on the education sector and the

98 Künzler 2008.

99 Kouchémin, 'Enseignement supérieur au Bénin...,' *La Nation*, 8 November 2018, 8.

100 Ibid.

101 Aléza 2021.

escalating cost of living. This financial shortfall forces students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to take menial jobs to make ends meet. Despite various state measures to secure employment for young graduates, the article concludes that

[...] the salvation of graduates can no longer depend solely on the resources of the state, given the economic difficulties facing countries around the world, especially in the developing world. The Togolese government has long encouraged young people to become self-employed or start their own businesses. [...] Looking towards a better future, every student should consider creating a job as soon as they begin university to avoid facing an ordeal when seeking employment later.¹⁰²

The advocacy of entrepreneurial management in higher education has gained momentum, with various stakeholders proposing it as a strategic response to the employment challenges faced by graduates. This approach emphasises the importance of providing not only high quality but also personalised education, with a strong focus on cultivating entrepreneurial and managerial skills in both students and faculty. In addition, developing a broad range of skills, including hard and soft skills such as punctuality, dedication, and resilience under pressure, is deemed essential. These skills, complemented by organisational abilities and digital literacy, are increasingly sought after by employers and can significantly enhance graduates' prospects in the labour market. By aligning educational content with the evolving needs of the labour market, Togolese universities can better prepare students for successful professional integration, thereby mitigating the challenges of underemployment and unemployment.¹⁰³

Almost ten years later, another article appeared in *Togo-Presse*, highlighting the bleak employment prospects for Togo's burgeoning youth population and noting an increased tendency towards precarious employment, such as Zémidjan driving, particularly among those with higher levels of education. A study conducted in 2015 revealed a concerning combined unemployment and underemployment rate of 28.6% for individuals aged 15 to 35 years. This growing problem leaves many young people increasingly helpless, facing an uncertain future with limited personal or collective prospects. In a climate in which the public sector is saturated and cannot absorb the surplus labour force, entrepreneurship is seen as a key solution, especially for the youth. The education system, largely designed for salaried employment, reflects a legacy of the colonial era when education was aimed at developing an elite for administrative roles. The article concludes that this model

102 Aleta, 'La recherche d'emploi...', *Togo-Presse*, 22 September 2006.

103 Chitou 2011; Yaou 2022.

is now being challenged, necessitating a shift towards embedding entrepreneurial skills in the curriculum to promote self-employment and innovative job creation to address pressing socio-economic challenges.¹⁰⁴

Similar to Togo, Benin's higher education system exhibits a significant mismatch between the training provided and the demands of the labour market. This issue is underscored by the absence of vocational training and the poor quality of education in both public and private institutions. According to Sénou, graduates encounter substantial barriers to employment, primarily due to a lack of multi-disciplinary skills. A shift towards more market-oriented, professionalised education and the enhancement of practical skills could markedly improve graduates' employment prospects.¹⁰⁵

In conclusion, the proliferation of private universities in Benin and Togo has occurred amidst escalating graduate unemployment and a growing disconnect between the skills imparted by higher education institutions and labour market demands. Despite promises of better examination results and global recognition, private institutions often struggle with inadequate infrastructure, uneven teaching quality, and graduates ill-prepared for the workforce. Consequently, graduates in both countries encounter significant barriers to employment, leading to a troubling rise in precarious work and youth unemployment. Faith-based student associations have increasingly intervened to address this crisis, offering members not only spiritual guidance but also practical training in entrepreneurship, leadership, and professional skills. By providing the 'added value' often missing from formal university curricula, these groups are positioning themselves as key players in equipping students for contemporary job market challenges and fostering socio-economic development.

Religious Groups, Skill Development and Entrepreneurship

As Stambach notes, with scarce employment opportunities post-graduation, students worldwide are increasingly focused on differentiating themselves through additional skills and work experience.¹⁰⁶ Many participate in religious organisations on campus, which offer vocational training and valuable social networks alongside spiritual services. The emphasis on leadership, entrepreneurship, and essential labour market skills is particularly evident in Bible groups. In Benin, as

¹⁰⁴ Adjosse, 'Promotion de l'entrepreneuriat....,' *Togo-Presse*, 18 September 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Sénou 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Stambach 2017.

Mayrargue points out, the leaders of major evangelical churches predominantly aim to develop social initiatives in health, education, and development. These efforts respond to concrete needs and facilitate evangelisation, enhancing the social presence of Christian movements. Inspired by the historical involvement of the Catholic Church and, to a lesser extent, the Methodist Church, these initiatives tackle social problems as a means of spreading the Gospel. They also have a political dimension, allowing initiators to replace the state, collaborate with it, or even compete with its powers.¹⁰⁷

The increasing emphasis on entrepreneurship and practical skills development by Christian student associations like GBEEB and GBUST can be situated within the broader rise of neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel in African Christianity. Neo-Pentecostal churches often preach a message of material success and upward mobility, framing entrepreneurship as both a spiritual discipline and a personal responsibility. This 'entrepreneurial spirituality' signifies a shift towards a more individualised, market-oriented form of religiosity that values worldly achievement as a sign of divine favour. By promoting business acumen and leadership skills, Christian student associations align themselves with this neo-Pentecostal ethos and its vision of holistic flourishing.

While GBEEB's primary mission remains evangelism, student leadership and training occupy a central place. GBEEB's diverse activities reflect its commitment to developing students' academic and professional skills through a distinctive blend of practical and spiritual elements. As one leader stated, 'Our ministry is meant to be holistic.'¹⁰⁸ Student leadership, the cornerstone of the ministry, is cultivated to unleash the creative initiative of students, enabling them to positively impact their church and community. Between 2009 and 2021, the training of student leaders became a top priority for GBEEB's General Secretary.¹⁰⁹ In 2013, GBEEB established the 'Leadership Institute' (*Institut de Leadership*). This institute offers training to help students understand GBEEB's vision, the role of the Bible Group on campus, and the responsibilities of a GBEEB member in society. Driven by the desire to see students actively engage in missions of evangelism, training, and societal impact, GBEEB has sought to cultivate a generation of young leaders. The training covers areas such as integrity, leadership, academic excellence, professional ethics, marriage, accountability, vocational integration, and the moral and spiritual develop-

¹⁰⁷ Mayrargue 2005, 250.

¹⁰⁸ Hake Chabi Assa, Fabrice Hounkpevi and Angelo Klanclounon, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 March 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

ment of youth. By 2018, the Leadership Institute had trained 62 student leaders across three cohorts.¹¹⁰

For the current GBEEB General Secretary, the association prioritises excellence in academic environments. Regular tutorials and coaching sessions are organised for master's and doctoral students. In addition, GBEEB facilitates practical and professional experience through internships in administration and within the group itself.¹¹¹ The leadership ethos within GBEEB emphasises a student-led approach and servant leadership, organically adopted by students who mentor and lead their peers. This student-led model is central to their organisation, with leaders identified based on biblical knowledge and commitment to service. Their leadership style is rooted in active participation and leading by example, not merely issuing orders.¹¹²

GBUST in Togo shares similar aims. At a 2003 conference organised by the Bible groups on the theme 'A contemporary Christianity, is it possible?', the GBUST general secretary emphasised the need 'to adapt the gospel to the ever-changing environment to avoid any anachronism, to adapt it to current realities and to reach the non-Christian public.' In addition to evangelism, the Bible groups also promote self-employment.¹¹³ During the 2009 Student Cultural Week at the University of Lomé, a Bible seminar addressed how to successfully complete studies under the LMD system. The seminar aimed to develop the spiritual and intellectual capacities of Christian students, emphasising that academic responsibilities should not be neglected.¹¹⁴

In his inaugural address as GBUST Secretary General in 2014, Armand Dzadu stated:

Our vision is to transform pupils, students, and intellectuals for life. We are among those who refuse to overlook the strategic places where the future of our societies is at stake every minute: our lycées, our *grandes écoles*, and our universities. Every day, we are astonished by the lack of seriousness in the management of our society and the governance of our nations, while the percentage of intellectuals with real values, capable of exerting the necessary influence in the decision-making spheres, is only anecdotal! The reality is that while some of us turn a blind eye to these places and continue on their way as if everything were self-evident, the lawless are taking control of all spheres of influence, acting at the grassroots level. [...]

110 Klanclounon, 'La merveilleuse aventure de notre Institut de Leadership,' accessed 17 August 2023.

111 Hake Chabi Assa, Fabrice Hounkpevi and Angelo Klanclounon, in conversation with the author; Cotonou, 2 March 2022.

112 Ibid.

113 Pouh, 'Le GBUST pour une adaptation...', *Togo-Presse*, 12 February 2003.

114 Tagba, 'Semaine de l'étudiant 2009...', *Togo-Presse*, 1 April 2009.

Above all, during this term, we want to see more and more of our postgraduate students making progress in how they influence our society.¹¹⁵

In 2017, for example, GBUST organised a public conference in Lomé entitled 'The Christian elite faced with the challenge of developing the Togolese nation'. The initiative was part of their broader vision to form a community of students transformed by the Gospel, who have a lasting impact on the church and society at large. The conference, which attracted 300 participants, focused on three specific sub-themes: 'The Christian elite at the service of the Church', 'Universities, a strategic mission field in which to engage', and 'The contribution of the Christian elite to social cohesion and the promotion of a better life'. The event aimed to foster the emergence of committed Christian intellectuals who will play a more active role in the development of Togo.¹¹⁶

When I met Dzadu in 2021, his vision for GBUST remained steadfast: 'The overall vision is to see students formed into a community of disciples, transformed by the Gospel, to have an impact. [...] An impact that can be seen immediately in the university, but also and above all, and this is the ultimate goal, in society. [...] We are developing student leaders.'¹¹⁷ According to him:

What builds a person's life is not the average grade in a master's degree. It's the added value. [...] In my generation, which graduated from university in 2006, I know at least a hundred [activists]. [...] Of those hundred, many are in leadership positions, and not one of them is unemployed. If you look at the same cohort in general, you'll see graduates who are doing *Zémidjan*. [...] It's no accident. We give our students something extra, so when you put them in competition with others on the job market, you notice they have attributes beyond the diploma. [...] We provide students with what the strict academic system may not offer.¹¹⁸

The veracity of these claims is difficult to verify, yet testimonies from former GBEEB and GBUST activists who credit their professional success to skills gained through association involvement demonstrate how this entrepreneurial framing shapes students' aspirations and subjectivities. By presenting leadership development and business training as forms of spiritual empowerment, these associations encourage members to view economic striving as an expression of religious identity and purpose. Success in the marketplace becomes a sign of divine blessing and faithful stewardship. This 'prosperity' mindset imbues individual socio-economic advance-

115 'Le Nouveau Repère édition spéciale 1,' May 2014, accessed 27 June 2024.

116 Ayeboua-Aduayom, 'Chrétiens et engagés pour le développement de la nation,' accessed 14 August 2023.

117 Armand Dzadu, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 12 August 2021.

118 Ibid.

ment with religious significance, potentially reshaping how student activists perceive their roles and responsibilities as Christian leaders in society.

This trend and narrative are mirrored in both Catholic and Muslim student organisations, which are also adapting to include leadership and entrepreneurial skill development in response to the challenging labour market. Students on campus in the 2000s, as well as many activists from the 1990s, have highlighted the valuable skills acquired through their involvement in these groups. A former JEC activist at the University of Abomey-Calavi, for instance, noted that his participation significantly contributed to his personal development. JEC helped him overcome shyness and taught him effective public communication. The movement also instilled values such as commitment and altruism.¹¹⁹

Emile Eteka, active in the JEC of the UAC from 2003 to 2008 and later in the Benin JEC National Office from 2010 to 2012, credits his leadership skills to his involvement in the JEC. He emphasised how the JEC fostered his organisational and relational abilities, which have distinguished him professionally. According to Eteka, these skills, often beyond the academic curriculum, are cultivated through activism in groups like the JEC. He highlighted the comprehensive nature of the JEC's training, which extends beyond religious teachings to include technical and interpersonal development, asserting that this holistic approach equips members for life's many challenges: 'With the same qualifications and skills, there's something extra that I bring to the table in a practical and dynamic way that you can feel. That's what I learned at the JEC.'¹²⁰ Similarly, the former national president of the JEC of Benin and of the JEC of the University of Parakou praised 'the commitment of the JEC to the formation of a more complete human being', considering the spiritual dimensions, human aspects, and personal relationship with God. He emphasised the central role of JEC training in his current role as cabinet director, attributing his skills in campaign organisation and project design to his time at JEC.¹²¹

Alain Gnansounou began his activism with the JEC in the sixth grade in 1993 and remained active until 2010, following the completion of his master's studies. He then joined RAJEC and was elected president in 2021. Reflecting on the profound impact the organisation had on his personal and professional development, he states:

¹¹⁹ Emile Eteka, Elvis Vitoule and Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Camille Agbeva and Jean Ezékiel Adigbe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 4 March 2022.

If I've become what I am, it's thanks to the JEC. [...] It's my skills that got me recruited. But I can affirm right away that if I had not been in JEC, it's not certain that I would have these skills. [...] I do not regret at all having been part of JEC because the human and even intellectual training I received came from JEC. [...] What JEC brought me is more than the education I paid for from sixth grade to the *terminale* or from the first year of university to my master's. [...] JEC has been more than a life school for me. [...] It's more than a school; it is a family. And I think every young Christian needs to attend this school to build a strong character and face life's challenges.¹²²

According to a former JEC-U leader who studied at the UL between 2008 and 2012, the association provided a platform for personal, professional, and spiritual development. He contends that the JEC offers a stimulating environment in which students can not only hone their leadership skills but also explore their spirituality differently from the traditional Church presentation. Unlike the conventional approach centred on ritual and prayer, JEC promotes a proactive method: members are encouraged to think critically, plan and execute actions, and then evaluate their results for potential improvements. In addition, JEC-U initiates activities such as company visits, tailored to the specific needs of each faculty. These activities aim to give students practical experience in their prospective professional environments. For example, members from the Faculty of Law and Diplomacy organised a visit to the Court of Auditors in Lomé.¹²³

Raymond Sedoufio, who led the JEC-U from 2017 to 2019, deviated from the typical path of joining the JEC during high school, first discovering the association at UL in 2013. He credits the JEC with significantly contributing to his personal and professional development, particularly through workshops that enhanced his report writing and project design skills – areas he had previously struggled with. The organisation not only focused on effective techniques but also emphasised professional best practices, including resume writing and entrepreneurship, thereby preparing him for future career endeavours. While the JEC's core identity remains religious, it also prioritises the professional skills of its members, offering a balanced mix of spiritual guidance and vocational training. Sedoufio highlighted this integration of spiritual and professional education as the JEC's distinctive contribution, effectively bridging a gap he perceived in conventional university education.¹²⁴

During Sedoufio's tenure as the leader of JEC-U, the primary challenge was to innovate by focusing on youth entrepreneurship and development. This strate-

¹²² Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 27 February 2022.

¹²³ Wilfrid Abessan, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 17 November 2022.

¹²⁴ Raymond Sedoufio, in conversation with the author, Google Meet call, 10 November 2022.

gic shift to address contemporary employment challenges even received support from the Ministry of Grassroots Development. Feedback from *Jécistes* confirmed the positive impact of these initiatives and highlighted their relevance to the students. Sedoufio advocates for the importance of young people remaining involved in movements and organisations like the JEC beyond their university studies. He believes that participation in such groups offers additional benefits, including networking opportunities, skills development, and skills demonstration: 'It's really important to be part of an association if you want to stand out from the crowd. Studying is no longer enough.'¹²⁵

Islamic associations have also embraced this trend. ACEEMUB's 2018 National Islamic Training Seminar included modules on citizenship and civic responsibility alongside teachings related to the Islamic faith. The aim was to train 'Islamically aware and intellectually competent Muslims to be true citizens committed to the service of the nation'. A representative from the Ministry of Industry and Trade presented the stages of setting up a business, the regulations governing commercial activities, and the procedures for registering economic operators in Benin. He provided examples of business success in the Muslim world and information on Islamic finance. The conference aimed to demystify entrepreneurship and provide guidance on becoming a successful entrepreneur.¹²⁶

The AEEMT has developed its training programmes not only to cultivate the leadership skills of its members but also to empower them for broader socio-economic roles. Emphasising entrepreneurship, these initiatives aim to equip members with practical skills for national development and workforce integration. Testimonials from former members frequently highlight the life skills gained through their involvement with the AEEMT.¹²⁷ During the 2010–13 mandate, the association increased its focus on entrepreneurship as a solution to unemployment, reviving its previous programmes. The initiative began with practical workshops on skills such as soap-making, which attracted significant participation at the campus mosque. A special National Commission for the Promotion of Entrepreneurship was established to inspire members to start businesses. Although the commission's momentum has fluctuated, it remains a key part of the AEEMT's strategy to prevent unemployment among its former members.¹²⁸ These broader socio-economic development goals continue to be important to the association's current leadership. 'A Muslim student shouldn't come to the AEEMT just to learn

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Fassassi, 'Séminaire national de formation...', *ASSALAM*, August 2018, 4.

¹²⁷ Taoufik Bonfoh, in conversation with the author; Lomé, 24 August 2021.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

about religion, and that's it', stressed the former Amir of the AEEMT. The association must become an 'instrument of socio-economic development' because activists are 'called to serve our country'.¹²⁹

This convergence towards an entrepreneurial focus in their social curricula highlights a broader trend of religious associations across the faith spectrum redefining their missions and relevance in response to the practical socio-economic challenges facing students. By emphasising skills training, business incubation, and leadership development, these associations are positioning themselves as resources for navigating an increasingly competitive and precarious job market. This shared 'entrepreneurial turn' recognises that spiritual formation and religious identity are deeply intertwined with questions of material well-being and professional success. The shift towards entrepreneurship and practical skills development in these faith-based associations reflects students' evolving aspirations for a good life. In a context where traditional pathways to success are increasingly uncertain, these groups are helping students reimagine what a fulfilling life might look like, often blending material success with spiritual and moral values.

The 'entrepreneurial turn' can be situated within broader debates on religious change and modernity in Africa. This entrepreneurial framing of religious activism resonates with neoliberal discourses of self-reliance, personal responsibility, and market-driven solutions to social problems. While this approach may offer pragmatic benefits to individual members, it also raises questions about the implications of reducing religious subjectivity to a means of personal advancement and material success. While the focus on leadership, entrepreneurship, and contributing to the country's economic development naturally extends to civic engagement and responsible citizenship, direct political participation is often deliberately avoided by most leaders of faith-based student associations.

Tension Between Civic Engagement and Distrust in Politics

The emphasis on entrepreneurship and leadership development in faith-based student associations can also be seen as a reframing of religious activism as a form of civic engagement and nation-building. By equipping members with practical skills and business acumen, these associations position themselves as incubators of responsible citizens and drivers of economic development. This framing positions religious activism as a constructive contribution to the common good, distinct from partisan politics or sectarian interests. By emphasising responsible citizen-

¹²⁹ Aziz Gountante, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 5 August 2021.

ship and civic engagement, these faith-based associations encourage students to see the pursuit of the good life not only in individual terms, but as part of a broader societal project. They help students envision a future in which personal success is intertwined with contributing to the common good. Entrepreneurship becomes a spiritual duty and a means of advancing social progress, allowing faith-based associations to assert their public relevance in a development-oriented society.

Despite an emphasis on civic engagement, religious student associations maintained their apolitical stance into the 2000s and 2010s, continuing a trend from the 1990s. For instance, following its 2011 congress, ACEEMUB enshrined its ‘apolitical character’ in its statutes.¹³⁰ During Benin’s tense 2016 presidential elections, the university’s JEC organised a march advocating violence-free elections, drawing over a thousand students and media attention.¹³¹ In Togo, JEC-U consistently acted as a mediator. Michel Oni Djagnikpo, active in the JEC-U from 2002 to 2007, described the campus as a ‘political battlefield’ between pro-government and opposition groups. Collaborating with its chaplain, JEC-U frequently called for peace.¹³² During the major strike of the 2011–12 academic year, JEC-U maintained neutrality and a mediating role, actively participating in university administration meetings to resolve the crisis: ‘Our role has always been to advocate appeasement and dialogue, so that decisions are made with everyone’s best interests in mind.’¹³³

As seen previously, in Benin, the increasing influence of evangelical Christianity in politics, especially under Presidents Kérékou and Boni Yayi, fostered a more favourable environment for Christian student groups. The ‘Christianisation’ of public life and the elevation of evangelical figures to prominent government roles legitimised the public engagement of Evangelicals and aligned with their vision of faith-based leadership and moral transformation. Surprisingly, this political climate did not significantly embolden Christian student groups to assert their civic relevance and promote governance models based on spiritual values. A GBEEB leader articulated the group’s approach to political engagement, stressing that GBEEB does not dictate electoral choices but rather promotes leadership development aware of societal roles. GBEEB members are recognised for their positive impact on society through their involvement in both the public and private sectors of the Beninese administration. Although unaffiliated with any political movement, GBEEB encourages members to exercise their civic rights responsibly, including

130 Aboudou, ‘Relecture des textes de l’ACEEMUB...’, *ASSALAM*, October 2011, 4.

131 Camille Agbeva and Jean Ezékiel Adigbe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 4 March 2022.

132 Michel Oni Djagnikpo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 23 August 2021.

133 Wilfrid Abessan, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 17 November 2022.

voting. The association respects individual political views, which may not reflect GBEEB's collective stance. Currently, GBEEB is establishing a specialised policy advisory body to introduce logical and ethical perspectives into national political discourse.¹³⁴

The AEEMT in Togo exemplifies the political and civic engagement of a faith-based student association. At its 9th congress in 2015, the organisation outlined a vision that 'by 2040, the AEEMT should be an ideal framework for the emergence of a Muslim youth that is proud and responsible of its faith, where men and women leaders will emerge, citizens imbued with ethics, who practice and defend an authentic Islam and contribute to the development of Togo.'¹³⁵ This vision, although formally declared in 2015, has guided AEEMT's activities since the 2000s. In 2002, for instance, the association held a conference on 'Islam and Democracy' at the University of Lomé during a cultural week for Muslim students. Participants discussed Islam's compatibility with democratic values, governance, human rights, and women's leadership.¹³⁶ Similarly, in 2006, AEEMT, along with WICS and the Islamic Cultural Centre, organised a seminar on 'The role of the Muslim community in civil society' to encourage greater civic engagement among Togolese Muslims.¹³⁷ In 2013, AEEMT hosted a conference exploring the compatibility of Islam and good governance. Addressing over a hundred students, Professor Akrawati Shamsidine Adjita – a long-time AEEMT patron at the UL – argued that good governance is a fundamental principle in Islamic teachings. Drawing on the Qur'an's emphasis on human and economic rights, he contended that Islam provides comprehensive guidelines for good governance, offering solutions to contemporary societal challenges.¹³⁸ These initiatives collectively demonstrate AEEMT's commitment to fostering a deeper understanding of Islam's role in civic engagement and governance, encouraging critical thinking, active participation, and meaningful contributions by Muslim students to Togo's development.

However, despite its emphasis on civic engagement and governance, AEEMT has consistently refrained from taking part in political debates since its inception, as noted by a former Amir. This stance stems from a desire to avoid conflict, as in Togo, any form of criticism or dissent is perceived as opposition to the government.¹³⁹ A notable exception occurred in late April 2005, during a period of campus

134 Hake Chabi Assa, Fabrice Hounkpevi and Angelo Klanclounon, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 March 2022.

135 Aziz Gountante, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 5 August 2021.

136 Aveyor, 'Islam et démocratie / droits...', *Togo-Presse*, 30 April 2002.

137 Pitassa, 'Les jeunes musulmans initiés...', *Togo-Presse*, 7 June 2006.

138 Ibrahim, 'Conférence sur la bonne gouvernance en Islam,' accessed 27 June 2024.

139 Taofik Bonfoh, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

unrest. Some AEEMT members participated in the movements individually, without officially involving the organisation. This led to an incident in which armed soldiers pursued students into the mosque. The confrontation turned violent, with students being physically assaulted, including in the ablution areas, and some were imprisoned. This breach prompted a reaction from university faculty, including Professor Adjita, who drove to Lomé II to meet with then-president Eyadéma. At this meeting, the faculty highlighted the severity of the soldiers' actions, particularly their inappropriate entry into a sacred space like a mosque. President Eyadéma acknowledged the overreach, and although several AEEMT members were initially detained, they were soon released.¹⁴⁰ Recognising this sensitive environment, AEEMT focuses on development-related initiatives rather than political issues. In contrast, the *Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo* (ACMT), led by many former AEEMT members, actively engages in political debates, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

The AEEMT has stayed out of political debates, as demonstrated during the major anti-government protests of 2017–18. Tikpi Salifou Atchadam, leader of the *Parti National Panafricain* (PNP), emerged as a central figure in the opposition movement, building strong grassroots support, particularly among Muslims. In response, the ruling party sought to discredit Muslim opposition figures by dubiously linking them to a supposedly threatening wave of political Islam.¹⁴¹ Socio-political tensions on the Lomé campus were palpable. The AEEMT distanced itself from the PNP. As one AEEMT official noted, it was true that some members of his association, including members of the national bureau, identified with the PNP individually, but this did not bind the association. He cited the national Islamic training seminar in Atakpamé in August 2017, which gathered delegates from various localities, including Sokodé, a PNP stronghold. Concurrently, the PNP organised an opposition march. Managing the situation was complex for AEEMT leaders, as participants from Sokodé faced criticism from their elders for attending the seminar instead of joining the demonstration. Despite these challenges, the AEEMT maintained its neutrality.¹⁴² The organisation's cautious approach to political engagement, emphasising neutrality and development-oriented initiatives, reflects the constraints and risks of operating in a context of limited democratic space. In this environment, the Muslim student association had to carefully navigate the line between civic participation and political activism, focusing on entrepreneurship and moral guidance rather than direct political critiques.

¹⁴⁰ AEEMT, 'Historique de l'AEEMT: histoire de la section UL,' uploaded 29 June 2022.

¹⁴¹ Madore 2021.

¹⁴² Aziz Gountante, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 5 August 2021.

Despite divergent political contexts, faith-based student associations in both Benin and Togo grappled with similar tensions between civic engagement and political neutrality. Their focus on leadership development, entrepreneurship, and moral transformation represents an effort to redefine citizenship and political participation beyond partisan politics. By framing religious activism as a positive contribution to nation-building and the common good, these associations positioned themselves as alternative spaces for civic engagement, distinct from the perceived corruption and dysfunction of formal political institutions. The experiences of faith-based student associations in Benin and Togo offer insights into broader debates about the role of religion in public life and the evolving nature of citizenship and political participation in African democracies. By promoting faith-based models of leadership and moral transformation, they challenge dominant ideologies of secularism and neoliberalism, highlighting the relevance of spiritual values in the public sphere. However, their focus on individual empowerment and market-driven solutions risks depoliticising structural inequalities and avoiding more contentious issues of social justice and systemic change.

As African societies grapple with the challenges of democratic consolidation, economic development, and social cohesion, the evolving strategies and discourses of faith-based student associations shed light on complex negotiations between religion, politics, and citizenship. Their experiences reveal the potential for religious activism to act as a catalyst for civic engagement and alternative visions of the public good, while also underscoring the limitations and contradictions of faith-based mobilisation in contexts of political uncertainty and socio-economic precarity.

During the 2000s and 2010s, the higher education landscape in Togo and Benin underwent substantial transformations. This period witnessed the establishment of new public universities and the adoption of the LMD system within the framework of neoliberal reforms, which greatly impacted higher education. Despite these developments, persistent challenges such as overcrowding and graduate unemployment, which first emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, remained unresolved. In this context, faith-based student associations gained prominence on campuses. While not rivalling secular student unions in size, they have become an integral part of campus life, offering a unique blend of religious and moral guidance coupled with skills development. Their presence underscores a broader trend of increasing religiosity within public universities, reflecting and responding to the evolving socio-political environment as students navigate an increasingly challenging era for graduates.

The rise and subsequent decline of Salafism on campus, particularly in Lomé, not only highlights the internal transformations of these groups but also underscores a broader shift towards entrepreneurship within faith-based student associations. As these organisations increasingly prioritise socio-economic activities, their

social curricula have expanded to occupy a central role in their campus agendas. This shift can be attributed to the interrelated dynamics of the proliferation of universities, educational reforms, and the prominence of narratives promoting entrepreneurship among university students, which have significantly impacted student skills development. The expansion of higher education and the introduction of the LMD system aimed to address overcrowding and graduate unemployment. However, these reforms were insufficient to equip students with the practical skills needed to succeed in an increasingly competitive job market.

In this context, religious groups on campus emerged as key actors in bridging the gap between academic education and professional demands. By emphasising leadership development and entrepreneurship, these groups provided students with a complementary 'social curriculum' that enhanced their employability and personal growth. As students in Benin and Togo grapple with an uncertain future, faith-based associations have become important spaces for reimagining and pursuing the good life. By offering a mix of spiritual guidance, practical skills and a vision of responsible citizenship, these groups are helping students navigate the challenges of contemporary society and construct meaningful life trajectories in the face of socio-economic precarity.

The following chapter explores how the experience and skills gained by these activists during their time at university translate into their lives beyond campus. By examining the life trajectories of some of these former activists, the analysis will illuminate how their participation in faith-based associations has shaped their professional and personal development.

6 The Becoming of Former Activists Beyond Campus: A New Religious Elite

A central theme explored in this book is the transformation of university campuses from predominantly academic spaces to arenas of moral activism and sociopolitical engagement. This shift highlights the university's role as a crucible for developing a diverse range of skills and experiences. These formative experiences, significantly shaped by the 'alternative degrees' offered by faith-based student associations, extend beyond formal education. Skills such as public speaking, organisation, and networking cultivated within these groups are crucial in shaping activists' professional achievements. This phenomenon highlights the influence of the 'social curriculum', encompassing the informal and experiential learning acquired alongside formal academic education.

This chapter examines the post-campus trajectories of former activists from Christian and Islamic student associations at the University of Lomé and the University of Abomey-Calavi. It aims to understand how the skills and experience gained during their time on campus are translated into broader social, political, and religious spheres, providing insights into the lasting impact of their university years. Key questions addressed include: How do non-academic campus experiences shape life trajectories? How does faith-based activism prepare former students for sociopolitical engagement? By examining the lives of some of these former activists, we can assess the extent to which their campus experiences have equipped them for leadership and influence in wider society. In doing so, we explore universities not only as sites of socialisation and personal development but also as incubators for a new religious elite.

Many alumni associations have been established by students after graduation, becoming pivotal in supporting current generations on campus. Beyond religious engagement, the involvement of these emerging elites in sociopolitical debates presents a mixed picture. Former *Jécistes* generally remain in the shadow of bishops, while former members of biblical groups are often reluctant to engage in politics, perceived as an immoral space. In contrast, Muslim alumni of AEEMT and ACEEMUB have assumed more significant leadership roles within their religious communities, focusing on reorganising their representative bodies to interface with the state, marking a distinct approach in their post-university trajectories.

The influence of former activists from faith-based student associations in Benin and Togo underscores the significance of religious networks as alternative spaces for civic engagement. In contexts in which formal political channels may be restricted or perceived as corrupt, these networks of former activists have served as training grounds for leadership and civic participation. The role of former activ-

ists in shaping national discourses and community structures suggests that these networks function as key sites for cultivating the skills and social capital necessary for effective public engagement.

6.1 A Nostalgia for Activism: New Faith-Based Associations of Former Student Activists

In Benin and Togo, activism often extends beyond graduation. Many alumni of Catholic and Islamic student associations transition into roles within organisations such as the *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes* (RAJEC), the *Amicale des Intellectuels Musulmans du Bénin* (AIMB), and the *Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo* (ACMT). Networks like RAJEC and the *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes d'Afrique* (Network of Former *Jécistes* of Africa, RAJA) support Catholic activism on campus and promote student mentoring across borders. For Muslims, AIMB and ACMT unite Western-educated intellectuals and cadres. These organisations embody a shared aspiration among former student activists: to continue their faith-based engagement and address societal challenges post-graduation, highlighting a common trajectory of faith-based activism in both countries.

From the *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes* to a Transnational Network of Former *Jécistes*

The first network of former activists of faith-based student associations in Togo originated in October 1987. This initiative gathered former JEC members, now in professional life, to preserve their Catholic faith through the enduring JEC pedagogy of 'See-Judge-Act.' Called the *Association Catholique pour la Réflexion et l'Apostolat des Laïcs* (ACRAL), it initially began in Lomé and later expanded to cities such as Atakpamé, Sokodé, and Kpalimé. Formally established at a general assembly in 1994, ACRAL members have maintained an active link with the JEC movement, contributing to reflection days and conference debates. In the early 1990s, ACRAL members were frequently invited by current *Jécistes* to give lectures, demonstrating the continuity of their influence and commitment to the movement.

Initially restricted to former JEC members, ACRAL eventually expanded its membership to include individuals who shared its ideals but who had not been part of the JEC. This inclusivity led to internal tensions, with some members feeling

the association's original mission was being diverted.¹ In response to these divisions, the *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes* (RAJEC) was founded in 1998. RAJEC's dynamic approach attracted many ACRAL members, somewhat eclipsing ACRAL. Nevertheless, the two associations continue to coexist, with RAJEC emerging as the main collaborator with JEC.²

The concept of alumni networks for former *Jécistes* transcended Togo's borders, leading to the establishment of similar groups in various African countries. Between 1991 and 1997, active correspondence between these groups culminated in the first general assembly of the *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes d'Afrique* (RAJA) in 1997 in Bingerville, Côte d'Ivoire. This meeting brought together around sixty participants from 13 African countries, including notable former Togolese *Jécistes* like Théophile Tonyeme, Pierre Radji, and Albert Akakpo, then president of ACRAL.³ Georgette Ngabolo, former president of the Gabonese JEC (1987–89), was a pivotal figure in this movement. As a student in France, she initially envisioned creating the *Amicale des Anciens Jécistes du Conseil Panafricain* (Association of Former *Jécistes* of the Pan-African Council) in 1986. However, it was ultimately decided that the organisation should welcome all former *Jécistes*, not just those who had participated in that council.

RAJA emerged in response to the needs of former JEC members throughout West Africa who wished to continue their Catholic commitment within a recognisable structure.⁴ The founders envisioned RAJA as a channel through which the experiences and skills cultivated in the JEC could be passed on to newer generations of *Jécistes*. As Akakpo put it, 'We couldn't just sit back and do nothing. Shouldn't we be mentoring young people, giving them some of our experience?'⁵ RAJA's objectives, as articulated in the final report of the Lomé meeting, were comprehensive:

The *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes d'Afrique* (RAJA) aims to be a platform for reflection and exchange for former members of the Jeunesse Étudiante Catholique d'Afrique, addressing the realities of life on the continent. Its goal is to foster the emergence of an authentic African laity capable of discerning the challenges facing the Church and society at economic, cultural,

1 Albert Akakpo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 2 September 2021; Komi F. Djeguema, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 26 August 2021.

2 Komi F. Djeguema, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 26 August 2021.

3 Pierre Radji, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 30 August 2021.

4 Djagnikpo, 'Cadre Stratégique de Développement du RAJA à l'horizon 2031,' accessed 28 December 2023; 'Rapport final de la rencontre à Lomé du Réseaux des Anciens Jécistes d'Afrique,' accessed 27 June 2024.

5 Albert Akakpo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 2 September 2021.

social, and political levels, by encouraging them to speak out and helping them anticipate ways of responding to their people's needs.⁶

In Benin, the formation of a similar network for former *Jécistes* followed a different timeline. Although Beninese *ex-Jécistes* were invited to RAJA's inaugural meeting in 1997, efforts to create a local network only gained momentum in 2003. This initiative was led by Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, who, after years of continued involvement with the JEC after graduation, decided to establish an alumni network. The catalyst was a JEC celebration day, traditionally held on Easter Monday by the Zogbo cell group in the Diocese of Cotonou. During this meeting, attended by former activists from various JEC cells, a decisive discussion took place: 'We are no longer students, but what can we do to maintain this fervent Christian activism?'⁷ This consensus spurred the creation of an alumni network. Between 2003 and 2005, former JEC members in Benin organised meetings, mobilised alumni, and compiled a comprehensive directory of all former JEC participants. Small group activities, including prayer sessions and meetings, were initiated. Members pooled funds to support one another during significant life events such as baptisms and births. They also made donations to orphanages and adult care centres and actively participated in their local parishes.⁸ Finally, in August 2005, they established the first executive committee of the *Réseau des Anciens de la Jeunesse Étudiante Catholique du Bénin* (RAJEC).

According to Deguenon, who served as RAJEC president from 2015 to 2017, the association is driven by a threefold mission. First and foremost, RAJEC addresses the challenge of maintaining the Catholic faith among its members. Since JEC membership ends with university graduation, without a structure to reinforce these teachings, there is a risk that members will revert to secular lifestyles. RAJEC provides a framework that continually reminds former members of their responsibilities as Catholic Christians. Secondly, RAJEC is committed to promoting active solidarity within its network. United by their common faith, members support each other to ensure everyone has the basic necessities for a decent life. The deep faith connections developed during university years are too important to discard in adulthood, making it essential for members to remain connected and supportive. Thirdly, RAJEC aims to develop exemplary individuals who can positively impact society. Although many Catholic Christians play strategic roles in their societies, African countries continue to struggle with underdevelopment and other significant challenges, Deguenon said. Tragically, it is often members of their own faith

⁶ 'Les commencements du Réseau des Anciens Jécistes d'Afrique (RAJA),' accessed 4 October 2022.

⁷ Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.

⁸ Pacôme Sevh, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 15 March 2022.

who contribute to these problems and hinder national progress, according to Deguenon. Consequently, RAJEC's primary social objective is to develop men and women who can serve as role models.⁹

According to Djedatin, fostering fraternity among members is another crucial component of RAJEC's mission. It has set up a unique initiative to spread the fraternity inherent in the JEC within the families of its members. An annual Christmas event dedicated to the children of RAJEC members exemplifies this effort. This event is more than a simple celebration; it symbolises a special moment of togetherness and sharing at the heart of their families. Through this activity, RAJEC members aspire to perpetuate the values and experiences of their religious activism, passing them on to their children.¹⁰

The creation of RAJEC in Benin mirrored the motivations seen in Togo, aiming to support young JEC activists. Recognising its fundamental link with the JEC, RAJEC established a special commission to provide comprehensive support, including spiritual, financial, moral, and technical assistance. This commission identifies areas in which RAJEC can effectively meet JEC's needs. A significant RAJEC initiative is the JEC-RAJEC Day, which facilitates interaction and the exchange of ideas between current and former activists. Additionally, RAJEC is committed to the training of young students. As active professionals with higher living standards, RAJEC members fund training courses for younger members and engage in social actions.¹¹ RAJEC Benin officially joined RAJA in 2007.¹² Since its creation, RAJA has held ten Pan-African General Assemblies, including one in Lomé in 2001, one in Ouidah (Benin) in 2016, and the most recent in Cotonou in 2022. Former *Jécistes* from Togo, Pierre Radji (2001–03) and Michel Oni Djagnikpo (2018–22), and from Benin, Auxence Vivien Hounkpe (2011–13), have served as RAJA Presidents.

Paralleling the development of RAJA, alumni of ACEEMUB and AEEMT established new Islamic associations to continue their activism after university, guide young students, and assert their presence as Western-educated Muslims in the public sphere.

9 Clotaire Deguenon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

10 Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 11 March 2022.

11 Emile Eteka, Elvis Vitoule and Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

12 Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.

Muslim Intellectuals and Cadres: The *Amicale des Intellectuels Musulmans du Bénin* (AIMB) and the *Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo* (ACMT)

In Benin, the declining involvement of former CIUB members after graduation led to the creation of the *Amicale des Intellectuels Musulmans du Bénin* (AIMB) in 1999. AIMB's goals were not only to support the nascent ACEEMUB, but also to promote tolerance and the practice of Islam, particularly in a minority context. In addition, AIMB sought to contribute to better organisation within the Muslim community in Benin, including the UIB. This initiative, as we shall see, underlines the broader ambitions of these former activists in shaping religious and community structures.¹³

In its early years, AIMB held weekly meetings, a practice that gradually diminished as members' professional and family obligations increased. Its activities centre on educational initiatives, both religious and secular, designed to deepen the understanding of Islam and encourage active participation in national decision-making. The association also supports young Muslim students and organises public conferences on various topics.¹⁴ One notable event was a symposium around 2009 on combating corruption. This symposium brought together priests, representatives of traditional religions, civil society members, and academics from the sub-region.¹⁵ Another key event is the Day of Islamic Sciences, an annual gathering at which a central theme is chosen to stimulate discussion and generate recommendations. For instance, the 2012 event centred on the Benin Code of Personal and Family Law.¹⁶

Despite its modest size, AIMB prioritises the quality of its members over quantity.¹⁷ Djibril Bossou, former Imam of CIUB (1994–99) and President of AIMB (2010–14), elaborates on the association's development and composition:

The association was established in response to the observation that, over time, students who had completed their master's degrees no longer had a platform to continue their activism in an Islamic association. Initially, the members of AIMB were mainly masters level students. Today, the association includes members who have completed their PhD and are working in administration. In this regard, we are fortunate to have doctors, lawyers, jurists, and others among us. [...] It is open to all students, especially those at master's level and above. We believe that students who have not yet obtained a master's degree should join ACEEMUB first.¹⁸

13 Nassirou Bako-Arifari, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 26 May 2019.

14 Zakary Sofian Traoré, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 April 2019.

15 Mahmoud Riadds Sidi, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 April 2019.

16 Mohktar and Aboudou, 'Le talk du mois,' *ASSALAM*, December 2011, 7.

17 Mahmoud Riadds Sidi, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 April 2019.

18 Mohktar and Aboudou, 'Le talk du mois,' *ASSALAM*, December 2011, 7.

In Togo, similar motivations led to the establishment of the *Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo* (ACMT), founded a few years after AIMB. A general assembly in Lomé in August 2006, organised by former AEEMT members and attended by people from across the country, marked the ACMT's launch. Conceived as a comprehensive national body, the ACMT addresses challenges related to the life and organisation of Islam in Togo. Its mission is to educate members on the fundamental principles and values of Islam and to dispel misconceptions about the religion through exemplary behaviour and practices.¹⁹ The ACMT's initiatives aim to improve the education of young Muslims, promote women's participation in economic development, and tackle issues such as poverty and HIV/AIDS. The organisation is dedicated to deliberation and action on matters relevant to the understanding and practice of Islam. It unites Muslim cadres from the public and private sectors, promoting the development and well-being of the Togolese Muslim community in accordance with secular principles.²⁰

The term 'cadre' was a central topic of discussion at the founding congress of the ACMT. Initially, the idea was to bring together 'Muslim intellectuals' to reflect on issues affecting the Muslim community and broader societal interests. However, the founders recognised the need to go beyond specific social categories or education levels. Consequently, they adopted a more inclusive interpretation of 'cadre' as referring to anyone with the 'capacity to make judgements on matters relating to the Muslim community and the general interest, both nationally and internationally.'²¹ Another unifying aspect within the ACMT is the predominant use of French. The theme of ACMT's first statutory congress in 2008 was 'Rights and duties of the Muslim cadre in the city'.²² More recently, in 2016, ACMT initiated the 'Ramadan for All' event in Lomé, aiming to promote interfaith dialogue, address social challenges such as corruption, early marriage, polygamy, and terrorism, and encourage responsible citizenship. The joint iftar, or breaking of the fast, served as a symbolic act of unity that transcended religious barriers.²³

Although the ACMT is not officially an alumni association of AEEMT, its leadership is largely made up of people who were active in AEEMT during their university years.²⁴ A founding member of AEEMT emphasised that prior to its creation, there was no formal platform to unite Muslims after graduation. The AEEMT

19 Lagbai, 'Mieux connaitre les valeurs...', *Togo-Presse*, 31 August 2006.

20 Pitassa, 'L'Association des Cadres Musulmans...', *Togo-Presse*, 3 October 2006.

21 Latifou Assikpa, Ouro Padna Esoh Izotou and Halourou Maman, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 19 May 2019.

22 Kamazina, 'L'ACMT a tenu son premier...', *Togo-Presse*, 26 December 2008.

23 'Deuxième édition du ramadan...', *Le Rendez-Vous*, 8 June 2017, 6.

24 Taofik Bonfoh, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

Council, formed in 2004, attempted to bridge this gap by bringing together former members to support AEEMT cells. However, this arrangement often led to tensions, as younger members felt overshadowed by their more experienced elders who wanted to impart their wisdom.²⁵ Despite these challenges, the link between the ACMT and AEEMT remains strong, albeit informal. Both associations collaborate frequently, and discussions are underway for a formal memorandum of understanding to streamline their joint activities.²⁶

In addition to the ACMT, other former AEEMT activists have created new associations or NGOs to continue their work in various fields. For example, Ali Abdel-Halim Touré, who served as Amir of the AEEMT from 2000 to 2002, has engaged in humanitarian work. He is currently president of the *Association islamique de bienfaisance pour le développement HADIS* (Islamic Charity Association for Development HADIS), which has been active since 2007, particularly in assisting prisoners.²⁷ These initiatives illustrate the ongoing commitment of former AEEMT members to promoting Islamic values in their areas of expertise.

In conclusion, the emergence of new faith-based associations for former student activists in Benin and Togo highlights a shared nostalgia for the sense of purpose and community fostered by their involvement in campus-based religious organisations. These new organisations provide a platform for both Catholic and Muslim alumni to continue their faith-based engagement, support younger generations of activists, and address societal challenges in their respective countries. In doing so, they offer a means for former activists to pursue their vision of the good life – one that balances professional success with spiritual fulfilment and social responsibility. While the trajectories of these associations differ slightly between Benin and Togo, the overall pattern is one of continuity and commitment to the values and skills cultivated during their formative years as student activists. Despite some differences in their organisational structures and activities, these associations are united by a common vision of faith-based activism as a means of personal and societal transformation. By leveraging the skills, networks, and entrepreneurial spirit fostered through their participation in campus-based religious associations, former activists in both countries have positioned themselves as influential actors in the religious, social, and political landscapes of their respective societies, continuing to reimagine and construct their vision of a meaningful and impactful life beyond graduation.

25 Latifou Assikpa, Ouro Padna Essoh Izotou and Halourou Maman, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 19 May 2019.

26 Aziz Gountante, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 5 August 2021.

27 Ali Abdel-Halim Touré, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 19 May 2019.

However, the involvement of these former student activists in the political sphere varies between religious groups. While Catholic intellectuals from the JEC and RAJEC tend to align their socio-political activism with the positions of their respective Bishops' Conference, their Muslim counterparts from the AIMB and ACMT have demonstrated a more assertive stance in shaping the religious and political landscapes of their countries, as we will explore in the following section.

6.2 A Christian Elite in Socio-Political Debates: A Half-Hearted Involvement

Over the years, the JEC has trained many influential leaders in Benin and Togo. These individuals often base their socio-political activism on the guidance of their Bishops' Conference. This cautious approach is evident in RAJEC leaders' tendency to echo episcopal positions rather than make independent statements. In Togo, despite the significant role of the Catholic Church, the involvement of Christian intellectuals in socio-political issues is mixed, with some accused of using religion for political purposes. This intersection of religious activism and political engagement presents a morally complex terrain, particularly from the perspective of former Bible Group members in Benin. Despite the significant impact evangelical movements have had in the political sphere, GBEEB leaders struggle with a dichotomy: a general distrust of political institutions versus a trust in religious leadership.

Catholic Intellectuals in the Shadow of the Bishops' Conference

Since its inception, the Benin JEC has produced many leaders who now hold key societal roles. A former JEC member notes that their dedication to God's work has translated into significant professional success.²⁸ For example, Pacôme Elet currently leads the Charismatic Renewal in Benin, as mentioned earlier. Several *ex-jécistes* have pursued academic careers, including Gustave Djedatin, who serves as Dean of the Faculty of Science and Technology at the Polytechnic University of Abomey in Dassa-Zoumé. Clotaire Deguenon has taken a position at the Supreme Court after serving as deputy head of cabinet at the Ministry of the Interior.²⁹ In the political realm, the JEC alumni network includes notable figures such as economist Albert Tévoédjrè (1929–2019), Dahomey's Minister of Information (1960–63),

²⁸ Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 11 March 2022.

²⁹ Clotaire Deguenon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

and Colette Sénami Agossou Houéto, who briefly served as Minister of Primary and Secondary Education in 2006.³⁰ More recently, Gildas Agonkan (*Union Progressiste*) and Barthélemy Dahoga Kassa (*Bloc Républicain*) have been elected to the National Assembly. The JEC has also produced numerous priests and nuns, including Monsignor Éric Soviguidi, a priest from the diocese of Cotonou in Benin, who serves as the Holy See's permanent observer to UNESCO – the first African to hold this position.³¹

The Togolese JEC similarly boasts several leaders on the international stage. Edouard Koutsava, who led JEC Togo from 2002 to 2005, served as Secretary General of JEC International from 2007 to 2011.³² Another notable figure is Father Achille d'Almeida, a priest from the diocese of Lomé and chaplain of the IYCS since 2020. His involvement with the JEC began in 1994 during his secondary education, and as a priest, he has supported JEC cells in various parishes in the diocese of Lomé. In 2014, the Togolese Bishops' Conference appointed him national chaplain of the JEC, a role in which he also served as sub-regional chaplain for francophone West Africa.³³

While the JEC and RAJEC in both Benin and Togo celebrate the influential leaders they have produced, the involvement of Catholic intellectuals from these associations in political debates is more nuanced compared to that of the Bishops' Conferences. In Benin, for instance, the *Conférence Épiscopale du Bénin* (Episcopal Conference of Benin, CEB) has been vocal on political issues, issuing pastoral letters during critical moments such as the political turmoil of 1995³⁴ and the presidential elections of 1996.³⁵ As discussed in the previous chapter, during the 2013 constitutional crisis under President Boni Yayi, the CEB expressed concern about democratic shortcomings and opposed proposed constitutional changes.³⁶ More recently, it has commented on the authoritarian turn since Patrice Talon assumed power in 2016.³⁷ In December 2020, the *Observatoire chrétien catholique de la gouvernance* (Christian Catholic Observatory on Governance), an arm of the CEB, called for the abolition of the endorsement requirement to ensure 'an impartial, transparent, credible and peaceful presidential election.'³⁸

30 Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi 11 March 2022.

31 Eblotié, 'Bénin: Mgr Éric Soviguidi...', *La Croix Africa*, 1 December 2021.

32 Modeste Lemon, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 November 2022.

33 Ayetan, 'Père Achille d'Almeida...', *La Croix Africa*, 24 February 2022.

34 Lanmafankpotin, 'Lettre pastorale des évêques...', *La Nation*, 23 February 1995.

35 'Election présidentielle de mars...', *La Nation*, 5 February 1996.

36 'Situation socio-politique: message...', *La Nation*, 20 August 2013.

37 Gbaguidi, 'Présidentielle du 11 avril...', *La Nation*, 24 February 2021.

38 Eblotié, 'Au Bénin, l'Observatoire chrétien...', *La Croix Africa*, 8 December 2020.

Similarly, Togolese bishops have consistently articulated their position on key national issues through pastoral letters. Notable examples include the call for a general amnesty in December 1990,³⁹ Archbishop Kpodzro's critical commentary on the Eyadéma regime on Radio Maria in April 2003,⁴⁰ and perspectives on the 2010 presidential elections.⁴¹ In recent years, the *Conférence des Évêques du Togo* (Togo Bishops' Conference, CET) has intensified its public engagement, with pastoral letters increasingly targeting the political class with pointed criticism. In September 2017, for example, the CET urged the government to implement 'reforms demanded by the people in accordance with the 1992 Constitution', implicitly advocating that the current president complete his term without seeking re-election in 2020, while denouncing ongoing repression.⁴² More recently, in June 2023, the CET called for the release of political prisoners detained during the tumultuous demonstrations between 2017 and 2020.⁴³

Although not officially representing the CET, Archbishop Kpodzro was a vocal advocate for the postponement of the 2018 legislative elections⁴⁴ and the suspension of the 2020 presidential elections to ensure a transparent electoral process.⁴⁵ He also launched the *Dynamique Monseigneur Kpodzro* (DMK), a 'campaign for the civic mobilisation of the Togolese people and the Diaspora for justice and peaceful change in 2020'.⁴⁶ The DMK advocated having a unified opposition candidate and supported the candidacy of Gabriel Agbéyomé Kodjo, nominated by *Les Forces Démocratiques*, a coalition of several opposition parties and civil society organisations. Archbishop Kpodzro died in January 2024 in Sweden, where he had been living in exile for the past three years because of his outspoken criticism of the ruling regime.

More recently, on 26 March 2024, the CET expressed its concern about the new constitution, adopted by the deputies. The bishops urged President Gnassingbé to postpone its promulgation. However, Gnassingbé sent the text back to parliament, which approved it unanimously on 19 April. The new constitution shifts Togo from a presidential to a parliamentary system and abolishes direct presidential elections, which were originally scheduled for 2025. Instead, deputies will elect the president

39 'Les évêques togolais se prononcent...,' *Courrier du Golfe*, 31 December 1990.

40 Amana, 'Les fidèles catholiques condamnent...,' *Togo-Presse*, 8 April 2003.

41 'Conférence des Evêques du Togo...,' *Présence Chrétienne*, 14 January 2010, 3.

42 'Prière et Déclaration de la Conférence des Evêques du Togo en faveur des réformes,' accessed 11 August 2023.

43 Ebloté, 'Togo: l'épiscopat demande...,' *La Croix Africa*, 19 June 2023.

44 'Togo: l'archevêque émérite de Lomé...,' *RFI*, 12 December 2018.

45 'Togo: l'archevêque de Lomé demande...,' *RFI*, 14 November 2019.

46 <https://www.initiative-mgr-kpodzro.org>.

for a four-year term, renewable once. Opposition leaders, under the *'Touche pas à ma Constitution'* (Hands off my Constitution) front, have condemned the revision as a 'constitutional coup', fearing that it paves the way for Gnassingbé's continued rule. Amidst these developments, the bishops have again appealed to the president, urging him to halt the promulgation of the new constitution and to initiate a broad political dialogue.⁴⁷

In both Benin and Togo, the involvement of the JEC and RAJEC in political discourse aligns closely with their respective Bishops' Conference. This alignment is reflected in the reticence of JEC leaders on political issues, as they often mirror the positions of the episcopal authorities, rather than making independent statements. As organisations under the Bishops' Conference, JEC and RAJEC leaders usually refrain from commenting on significant issues already addressed by the bishops. The former head of the national JEC of Benin summed up this perspective: 'We are in a national context where everything is quickly politicised. [...] As a result, the JEC in Benin avoids political issues as much as possible. [...] We just follow the position of the bishops.'⁴⁸

While the JEC and RAJEC in Benin often align their positions with their respective Bishops' Conferences, they also engage in their own initiatives to promote religious dialogue and democratic values. Over the years, RAJEC has utilised various media platforms to disseminate its messages. The Catholic *La Croix du Bénin* has been a valuable outlet for RAJEC to publish articles on religious dialogue initiatives. The former director of *La Croix du Bénin*, Father André Quenum, who passed away in 2014, was a strong supporter of JEC and RAJEC, facilitating their publications. However, since his death, their presence in the newspaper has diminished.⁴⁹ RAJEC has also leveraged television and radio to amplify its voice. During the contentious 2016 presidential election, RAJEC organised a debate on *Office de Radiodiffusion et Télévision du Bénin* (ORTB), Benin's public television channel, inviting religious leaders from various faiths to discuss religious dialogue and urge political actors to consider the nation's future. Additionally, they used the Catholic radio station *Immaculée Conception* to broadcast their messages.⁵⁰

The rise of communication platforms like WhatsApp has intensified socio-political debates among RAJEC members in Benin. However, as Hounkpe observes,

⁴⁷ Eblotié, 'Togo: les évêques exhortent...', *La Croix*, 26 March 2024; 'Togo: l'opposition monte au...', *Le Monde*, 28 March 2024.

⁴⁸ Camille Agbeva and Jean Ezékiel Adigbe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 4 March 2022.

⁴⁹ Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 27 February 2022.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

these internal discussions often do not result in official communiqués expressing RAJEC's stance on critical issues.⁵¹ This reticence is partly due to the association's deference to the Bishops' Conference. For example, when the 2021 bill to legalise abortion in Benin sparked controversy and opposition from the CEB,⁵² RAJEC leaders engaged in intense internal discussions but refrained from issuing an official statement:

As soon as the Bishops' Conference takes a stand or makes a statement, we're caught up in it, so maybe that's why the people in charge are dragging their feet and saying that the Bishops' Conference has taken our point of view into account. What more can we do? However, as a movement of this stature, it would still be important for us to have our own position on certain issues.⁵³

A committee has been established to lead these advocacy efforts, but it is not yet fully operational. This has resulted in occasional engagement without consistent presence or proactive monitoring of broader societal issues.⁵⁴ Despite these challenges, RAJEC members remain dedicated to promoting justice, peace, and democratic values through various initiatives at both national and pan-African levels. They have organised awareness campaigns, conferences, and debates, particularly around the anniversary of Monseigneur Isidore de Souza's death. At the pan-African level, RAJEC leverages the Pan-African RAJA Day on 22 August to address issues such as removing visa requirements between African countries, advocating for seamless travel and brotherhood across the continent.⁵⁵

The situation in Togo is similar for former JEC members. Although the Catholic Church generally enjoys a high profile, the role and influence of Christians in politics today is mixed. One former JEC member expressed scepticism about the involvement of Christian intellectuals in the country's major socio-political issues. In his view, while many people of faith are involved in politics, a significant number use their religious affiliation for political gain, exploiting the deep respect that religion enjoys in Togo. Lay Catholics who are genuinely committed to 'enlighten[ing] the political sphere from the height of religion' are rare and often contribute to the problem.⁵⁶

51 Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.

52 Sarr, 'Bénin: l'épiscopat fustige un...', *La Croix Africa*, 21 October 2021.

53 Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.

54 Clotaire Deguenon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

55 Ibid.

56 Théophile Tonyeme, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 7 September 2021.

The legacy of Edem Kodjo (1938–2020), a former *Jéciste* known for his high intellectual and moral stature, is often cited among the *Jécistes*. Kodjo served as Prime Minister of Togo twice, from 1994 to 1996 and from 2005 to 2006. To this day, many Catholics criticise Kodjo for actions and decisions perceived as inconsistent with Christian and JEC values.⁵⁷ In the 1994 legislative elections, the opposition unexpectedly won 43 out of 78 seats. Yet, this victory was overturned by President Eyadéma, who, following an appeal by the RPT (which had won 35 seats), influenced the Supreme Court to annul the results in three constituencies, depriving the opposition of its majority. In a surprising move, Eyadéma appointed Kodjo, the leader of the minority opposition, as prime minister on 22 April. Kodjo's decision to include eight RPT ministers in his cabinet and govern with Eyadéma's support⁵⁸ fostered disillusionment and mistrust among many former *Jécistes*, who believe that Catholic intellectuals could have played a more significant role in promoting democratic change.

Another factor that may influence RAJEC's level of socio-political engagement in both Benin and Togo are the periods of waning commitment to RAJA at the pan-African level. Hounkpe, who served as president of RAJA from 2011 to 2013, noted that RAJA's General Assemblies had increasingly become 'moments of tourism' for its leaders rather than a genuine Christian commitment to the movement.⁵⁹ This sentiment is echoed by Sevoh, a former president of RAJEC Benin (2017–22), who provided further insight into the nature of these assemblies. According to him, their Pan-African General Assemblies typically include a statutory section for reviewing organisational texts and a spiritual component featuring study sessions and reflections on the network's goals. However, these assemblies often resemble holiday camps more than serious forums for discussing the network's development. Participants tend to focus more on exploring the host country than on meaningful reflection and progress. Although many proposals are put forward during the discussions, the implementation of these recommendations remains limited, highlighting a gap between the assemblies' intentions and their outcomes.⁶⁰ This lack of follow-through on crucial initiatives may hinder RAJEC's ability to effectively promote its values and engage in meaningful advocacy efforts.

57 Michel Oni Djagnikpo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 23 August 2021.

58 Macé 2004, 869–70.

59 Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.

60 Pacôme Sevoh, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 15 March 2022.

Former Bible Group Activists and Politics: Navigating an Immoral Space

Like the JEC, the Bible groups have produced influential regional leaders. A prime example is Augustin Ahoga of GBEEB, who served as regional secretary of GBUAF from 2007 to 2019.⁶¹ GBEEB leaders often assert that their graduates have significantly impacted society, excelling in the job market and holding key positions in Benin's administrative spheres.⁶² However, former activists generally feel that the association's socio-political engagement has been lukewarm.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the interplay between political power and evangelical movements, along with the role of Beninese and foreign pastors during the presidencies of Kérékou II and Boni Yayi, has been a source of persistent speculation.⁶³ This complex relationship between evangelicalism and politics in Benin extends beyond the realm of high-level political manoeuvring, influencing the political attitudes and behaviours of believers at the grassroots level. In this context, Mayrargue's analysis offers valuable insights into the political culture fostered by Pentecostal teachings. He suggests that the Pentecostal emphasis on personal divine connection and individual empowerment fosters a distinctive democratic sensibility among believers in Benin. This religiously informed democratic ethos manifests in their support for political pluralism, albeit with a critical attitude towards political institutions and parties perceived as corrupt.⁶⁴ Such a perspective helps explain the paradoxical nature of evangelical political engagement in Benin, characterised by a commitment to democratic principles alongside a deep-seated scepticism towards existing political structures.

In Benin, the advent of multi-party politics in 1990 coincided with an unprecedented rise in the influence of money, corruption, nepotism, and clientelism in political life, echoing the patronage-driven dynamics of the 1960s. This era was characterised by numerous regional leaders with extensive patronage networks vying for power in an ever-shifting landscape of alliances. The political 'transhumance', fuelled by extreme fragmentation of the party system, has become commonplace in the public sphere.⁶⁵ Despite a strong commitment to democratic principles among the population, pervasive scepticism towards the political sphere persists. This dichotomy is encapsulated in recent Afrobarometer survey results, where less than half of respondents expressed confidence in key political institu-

⁶¹ Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

⁶² Yabi, 'Quarante ans d'impact du GBEEB,' accessed 10 August 2022.

⁶³ Mayrargue 2014, 103–04.

⁶⁴ Mayrargue 2004a.

⁶⁵ Banégas 2003, 14–15.

tions: only 42% in the National Assembly, and merely 39% and 36% in the ruling and opposition parties, respectively. In stark contrast, religious leaders enjoy much higher public trust, with 74% of people expressing ‘some’ or ‘considerable’ trust in them.⁶⁶ Underscoring this disparity, a separate survey found that 50% of citizens perceive ‘most’ or ‘all’ members of the National Assembly as being corrupt, while only 21% felt the same way about religious leaders.⁶⁷

Within both Christian and Muslim communities in Benin, there is profound disillusionment with the political sphere, often viewed with scepticism and associated with dishonesty and betrayal. This cynicism is reinforced by the belief that political involvement contradicts religious principles, branding politics as a domain fraught with deceit. However, the former general secretary of GBEEB, once involved in university politics, sees the lack of political engagement by active and former GBEEB members as a missed opportunity for the association and the wider Evangelical Church. He asserts, ‘We need to train leaders who can express their views on social issues as good Christian intellectuals’.⁶⁸ Despite the benefits derived from activism for better living conditions, most Protestant university students exhibit a palpable reluctance to engage in student movements, often influenced by church teachings that discourage political involvement. The former GBEEB secretary emphasises the need to prioritise training students to become Christian leaders who can positively contribute to both church and society, including within the university environment.⁶⁹

As Bertin underlines,⁷⁰ to fully grasp the relationship between evangelicalism and politics in Benin, it is necessary to look beyond official power structures and examine how evangelical influence permeates society through everyday interpersonal relationships. The evangelical moral model, which emphasises exemplary Christian behaviour, creates expectations and exerts power over social relations, including those with non-converts. This becomes a resource for political authority in a broader sense. Evangelical governmentality has a fundamental interrelational dimension: it is a moral endeavour aimed at influencing others and gaining their recognition.

66 ‘Les Béninois expriment plus de confiance envers les leaders religieux et traditionnels et l’armée que les leaders politiques et institutionnels, selon l’enquête d’Afrobarometer,’ accessed 2 January 2024.

67 ‘Les Béninois estiment que le niveau de corruption a diminué; plus pensent qu’ils peuvent dénoncer les actes de corruption sans peur,’ accessed 24 February 2024.

68 Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

69 Ibid.

70 Bertin 2024.

This perspective sheds light on how evangelical moralisation manifests in Beninese society through moralistic divisions between good and evil in the public sphere, influencing social and political relationships. Religious leaders emphasise the embodiment of exemplary Christian values, which are essential for social recognition and political ascension. These concepts of public sphere moralisation and evangelical governmentality can help us understand how faith-based student associations strive to shape behaviours and social norms on university campuses.

In this context, the reluctance of Protestant university students to engage in political movements, as noted by the former GBEEB secretary, takes on new significance. It reflects not just a withdrawal from formal politics, but potentially a different form of engagement that prioritises moral influence and social transformation through personal conduct and interpersonal relationships. The discussions around Christian exemplarity and social recognition become particularly relevant in exploring how leaders of faith-based student associations seek to influence their peers and gain legitimacy on campuses, even as they distance themselves from traditional political activism.

The landscape of Protestant, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches in Benin is characterised by intense competition, driven by the different ambitions and strategies of religious leaders. This competitive environment hinders unity within the Evangelical community and limits its political influence, in contrast to the more cohesive Catholic community. As Mayrargue notes, these churches must constantly innovate and forge distinctive identities to increase their visibility, grow their congregations, and attract followers. Most of these churches belong to either the Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Benin (CEPEB) or the Federation of Evangelical Churches and Missions of Benin (FEMEB), although some opt for autonomy and avoid collective affiliation.⁷¹ Additionally, the socio-political influence of the Evangelical Methodist Church of Benin has waned since the early 1990s, largely due to internal leadership conflicts following the tenure of Henry Harry, who led the church for nearly a quarter of a century.⁷² It was not until July 2016, following the personal mediation of President Talon, that the warring factions of the Methodist Church managed to reconcile.⁷³

This fragmented environment within the Evangelical community further contributes to the reluctance of Protestant university students to engage in student movements and political activism, as highlighted by the former GBEEB secretary. The lack of unity and cohesion among Evangelical churches, coupled with

71 Mayrargue 2002, 245–49.

72 *Ibid.*, 154–55.

73 Godonou, 'Réconciliation des protestants...', *24h au Bénin*, 3 July 2016.

the teachings that discourage political involvement, hinder the development of a strong, politically engaged Christian leadership. In this context, the former GBEEB secretary's current involvement in the *Initiative Chrétienne pour une Présence Persuasive* (Christian Initiative for Persuasive Presence, ICCP) reflects an effort to engage social issues from an evangelical Christian perspective and to encourage others to be more active in social and political debates.⁷⁴ This initiative aims to address the missed opportunity for the GBEEB and the wider Evangelical Church to train leaders who can positively contribute to both church and society, including within the university environment.

The trajectories of former activists from Christian student associations present a striking contrast to the historical pattern of traditional student unions serving as incubators for future political elites. While a few notable figures, such as Edem Kodjo in Togo and some former *Jécistes* in Benin, have pursued political careers, most former faith-based student activists have chosen to engage with societal issues through civil society rather than direct political involvement. This divergence can be largely attributed to the perceived incompatibility between the corrupted political sphere and the religious values these activists espouse. The political arena in Benin and Togo, as in many other African contexts, is often associated with patronage, clientelism, and a lack of transparency. For former members of faith-based student associations, shaped by a strong moral and ethical framework, navigating this murky terrain may be less appealing than effecting change through civil society initiatives. The emphasis on community service, social justice, and moral leadership characterising many of these groups translates more readily into advocacy work, public education campaigns, and grassroots mobilisation than into the cut-and-thrust of partisan politics.

However, this preference for civil society engagement over direct political involvement does not necessarily imply a lack of political influence. By shaping public discourse, mobilising communities, and holding those in power accountable, these former religious activists can play a significant role in the political life of their countries, even if they do not hold formal political office. By providing a moral compass and advocating for transparency, accountability, and the common good, these activists can contribute to the strengthening of democratic norms and practices, even as they remain outside the formal political arena. This approach represents a form of 'soft power' in the political landscape, in which influence is exerted through moral authority and grassroots mobilisation rather than direct participation in governmental structures. It allows these former faith-based student activists

74 Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

to maintain their ethical integrity while still impacting societal change, potentially reshaping the political culture from the ground up.

Interestingly, while the trajectories of former Christian student activists in Benin and Togo have largely been characterised by this cautious approach to political engagement, the experiences of their Muslim counterparts present a more assertive stance. As explored in the following section, former Muslim student activists, particularly those associated with AIMB in Benin and ACMT in Togo, have played an increasingly prominent role in shaping the religious landscapes of their countries and have more actively sought to influence the political sphere.

6.3 Muslims Intellectuals and ‘Francophone’ Islam: Combining Secular and Islamic Knowledge

In recent decades, French has become an important language for expressing Islamic thought among the urban, educated elite in francophone West Africa, with Côte d’Ivoire at the forefront.⁷⁵ This linguistic shift has prompted new religious practices and organisational structures within Muslim communities, marked by modern management techniques. Francophone elites use French to communicate, disseminate knowledge, and conceptualise Islamic practices, resulting in significant changes in Muslim societies across West Africa,⁷⁶ including Niger,⁷⁷ and Burkina Faso.⁷⁸ Particularly in urban areas since the 1990s, this phenomenon has fostered a vibrant culture of Islamic literature in French, with an increasing reliance on texts translated into or written in French. In Benin and Togo, Muslims identifying as ‘Muslim intellectuals’ (*‘intellectuels musulmans’*) have emerged as recognised interpreters and representatives of Islam, blending secular and religious knowledge. Former activists from AEEMT and ACEEMUB have significantly contributed to developing an Islamic press and have played pivotal roles in promoting the organisation and unity of the national Muslim community.

⁷⁵ Miran-Guyon and Oyewolé 2015; Madore and Binaté 2023.

⁷⁶ Triaud 2010.

⁷⁷ Sounaye 2015b.

⁷⁸ Madore 2020a.

Conférence Internationale des Musulmans de l'Espace Francophone (CIMEF) and the Islamic Press

The rise of an 'Islamic Francophonie' among Muslim intellectuals in Benin, Togo, and other francophone West African countries has been profoundly influenced by Tariq Ramadan, the Swiss-born grandson of Hasan al-Banna. Ramadan's influence is evident through the organisation of several *Colloque International des Musulmans de l'Espace Francophone* (International Conference of Muslims of the Francophone Space, CIMEF). Since 1991, the *Communauté Musulmane de la Riviera* (Muslim Community of the Riviera, CMR) in Côte d'Ivoire had hosted the *Séminaire International de Formation des Responsables d'Associations Musulmanes* (International Training Seminar for Leaders of Muslim Associations, SIFRAM) in Abidjan.⁷⁹ This event originated from a perceived neglect of Muslim cadres, intellectuals, and association leaders in the country's *da'wa* efforts. During the 1990s, this annual meeting drew between 150 and 200 participants from Côte d'Ivoire and across West Africa, featuring prominent speakers from Africa, the Arab world, and Europe, including Olivier Carré (1994), Djibo Amani (1994), and Hani Ramadan (1998).⁸⁰

Following the seventh edition of SIFRAM in Abidjan in 1999, which featured Tariq Ramadan,⁸¹ the CMR, in collaboration with Ramadan, initiated the CIMEF in Grand-Bassam in 2000.⁸² An article in *L'Appel*, an Islamic bulletin from Burkina Faso, summarised the rationale behind the creation of CIMEF:

During SIFRAM 99 in Abidjan, the need to unite Francophone Muslims around their concerns became apparent. According to statistics, the number of Muslims living in francophone areas, where French is either the official language or one of the official languages, is close to 200 million. The similarity of religious, social, cultural, political, and economic challenges makes the existence of such a framework a necessity. The CIMEF was therefore created to give leaders and intellectuals of Muslim associations in the French-speaking world the opportunity to interact within a single platform for reflection, exchange, and debate. They can share their views in the light of their respective realities and on issues of paramount importance. The discussions at this first CIMEF focused on 'The Muslim in the French-speaking world.' More specifically, the reflections centred on three major themes: Islam and Muslims in the French-speaking world, the question of *laïcité*, and the development of Islamic discourse in French.⁸³

79 Sidibé, 'Associations musulmanes...', *Fraternité Matin*, 28 August 1991.

80 Miran 2006, 348–62.

81 Al Seni, '7e SIFRAM: la problématique...', *Le Patriote*, 9 September 1999.

82 S., 'Grand Bassam: les musulmans...', *Fraternité Matin*, 8 August 2000.

83 Souley, 'CIMEF–SIFRAM 2000...', *L'Appel*, September 2000, 3.

The proceedings of the conference were published in 2001 under the title *Francophone Muslims: Reflections on Understanding, Terminology, and Discourse*.⁸⁴ The CIMEF has since been held biennially in various West African cities such as Cotonou (2002), Niamey (2004), Ouagadougou (2006), Lomé (2008), Bamako (2010), and Dakar (2013).⁸⁵ Chaired by Ramadan, these conferences have gathered representatives of Muslim organisations, intellectuals, and academics from Francophone countries in Europe and Africa. Discussions have revolved around contemporary understandings of Islam, the distinct position of Francophone Muslims within the global ummah, and their relationship with the West. Ramadan's emphasis on the importance of French as a key language in Islamic discourse, alongside Arabic and English, has profoundly influenced the Western-educated Muslim elite in francophone West Africa. This influence has fostered a unique Francophone Muslim identity, sparking discussions on modern Muslim identity, *laïcité*, and the adaptation of Islam to the current socio-political and economic environment.⁸⁶

Benin's participation in the first CIMEF in Abidjan paved the way for further initiatives. Inspired by Ramadan's proposal, the *Réseau des Associations et ONG Islamiques du Bénin* (Network of Islamic Associations and NGOs of Benin, RAI-Bénin) was established in November 2000 to unify various Muslim associations. Founded by Imam El-Habib (see Chapter 5), RAI-Bénin aimed to be a synergy network rather than a centralised federation, encompassing around fifteen associations and NGOs, including ACEEMUB and AIMB. One of RAI-Bénin's significant achievements was organising the second CIMEF, held in Cotonou in 2002.⁸⁷ *La Nation* reported that the conference theme, 'The International Scene: Islamic Discourse and Adapted Educational Experiences', was selected to address the crisis of Islam post 9/11. The conference aimed to counter the frequent conflation of Islam with terrorism, dismantling such stereotypes and asserting the true nature of Islam. Delegates from Europe, Asia, the Americas, and Africa gathered to discuss these critical issues. Imam El-Habib emphasised the necessity for Muslims to speak out, stating, 'We cannot afford to remain silent.' He noted that Muslims are often misunderstood, and this event provided an opportunity to clarify misconceptions while fostering a sense of brotherhood among Francophone Muslims.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ CIMEF 2001.

⁸⁵ The last and ninth edition took place in Abidjan in 2017.

⁸⁶ Holder and Sow 2014a, 25–26.

⁸⁷ Lauriano Kifouli, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 21 March 2019; Mahmoud Riadds Sidi, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 April 2019.

⁸⁸ Azifan, 'Colloque international des musulmans...', *La Nation*, 6 August 2002.

A few years later, the ACMT, in collaboration with the Muslim Union of Togo, organised the 5th CIMEF, held in Lomé in 2008. The event attracted over 400 delegates from 26 countries, including Tariq Ramadan, to discuss 'Islam and Development: Muslims and the Millennium Development Goals'. Inaugurated by the prime minister, the conference offered a platform for discussing the challenges of globalisation. Panel discussions focused on two key themes: 'Laïcité and the Muslim Community in the Francophone World' and 'Islam and Cultural Identity'. The first panel examined the experiences of Muslims living in secular environments such as Europe, as well as *laïcité* in countries with significant Muslim populations and those with Muslim minorities. The event received extensive media coverage in Togo.⁸⁹

An Imam from the Lomé Campus Mosque and former AEEMT activist highlighted the influential role of Tariq Ramadan in shaping their understanding of being Muslim in a secular society. According to him, Ramadan's teachings, widely disseminated through his recordings, significantly transformed their initial views. While they once equated *laïcité* with the absence of religion, their engagement with Ramadan and the CIMEF conferences has led them to see *laïcité* as a method of integrating religion into public life rather than excluding it.⁹⁰ This new perspective on *laïcité* has become a defining characteristic of the ACMT and its members. Kolani, president of the association from 2010 to 2018, remarked that for many Muslims and non-Muslims in Togo, being a member of the ACMT signifies seriousness: 'It's true that we don't speak Arabic like the others, but the knowledge we have in terms of general culture really helps us to explain religion easily, whether to Muslims or non-Muslims.'⁹¹

In the early 1990s, Francophone, Western-educated Muslims associated with AEEMT, ACEEMUB, ACMT, and AIBM astutely addressed a media policy gap within the Muslim community. Recognising the opportunity, they spearheaded the creation of an Islamic press to provide a platform for alternative viewpoints. This initiative coincided with the 'press spring' of the early 1990s, a period marked by sociopolitical liberalisation in francophone West Africa, including Benin and Togo, which heralded a new era of press freedom. Amid the proliferation of new daily and weekly newspapers and other periodicals in these countries, these young francophone Muslims took the lead in developing an Islamic press, addressing a need previously overlooked by the older generation.

⁸⁹ Tagba, 'Développement à travers l'islam...', *Togo-Presse*, 21 July 2008; Boukari, 'Colloque international des musulmans...', *Togo-Presse*, 7 August 2008; Pouh, 'Se colloque du CIMEF...', *Togo-Presse*, 11 August 2008; Pouh, 'Le 5^e CIMEF a pris fin...', *Togo-Presse*, 13 August 2008.

⁹⁰ Yaya Hussein Touré, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 14 May 2019.

⁹¹ Yaya Assadou Kolani and AEEMT leader, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 15 May 2019.

In Benin during the 1990s, the magazine *La Lumière de l'Islam* (The Light of Islam), directed by Mohammed Bachir Soumanou and El Hadj Latoundji, aimed to promote interfaith dialogue and position Muslims as key participants in the democratisation process. According to Brégand, these figures, who belonged to the educated bourgeoisie, represented a vision of liberal Islam. They fully embraced the state's secular nature and saw themselves as the modernist successors to their predecessors.⁹² Another significant publication, the *ASSALAM* newspaper,⁹³ launched by ACEEMUB in 2001, was created to highlight the achievements and aspirations of both the association and the wider Muslim community in Benin.⁹⁴ Initially, *ASSALAM* had a circulation of 2,000 to 3,000 copies, but by 2019, this had decreased to around 300–350 copies⁹⁵ and is now published online via Facebook.⁹⁶

La Lumière de l'Islam and *ASSALAM* have been instrumental in covering a wide range of issues, from religious dogma and national Islamic news to socio-political, cultural, and even sporting events, both local and international. These Islamic newspapers reflected the desire of a growing number of Western-educated Muslims to make their voices heard in the public arena and not be overshadowed by the current leadership of their community. Additionally, these media outlets became platforms for expressing underlying frustrations within the Muslim community, occasionally stirring up controversy. An insightful editorial in *ASSALAM* encapsulates these sentiments:

The Muslim community in Benin has existed for more than five centuries. It has counted among its ranks brave and upright individuals. But the community's record is mixed. [...] A community that has always mastered the verbs 'to give, to serve, to sacrifice, to love.' Yet its visibility is almost opaque. [...] The answer to this question is clear. From time immemorial, Muslims, obsessed with acquiring knowledge related to Islam, have neglected, undervalued, and rejected all other forms of knowledge. Yet these forms of knowledge are inherently and widely part of Islamic education. Here we are, centuries later, with little visibility, no streets named after Muslims, no significant consideration from those who 'lead' us. A community without a voice. [...] We must avoid hiding behind a set of mechanical rules and sanctify knowledge within the boundaries of halal and haram.⁹⁷

92 Brégand 2014, 231–32.

93 <https://islam.zmo.de/s/westafrica/item-set/2195>.

94 Euloge Abd-Gafar Zohoungbogbo, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 8 March 2019.

95 Mohamed Bachirou Ogbon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 14 March 2019.

96 <https://www.facebook.com/lejournalassalam>.

97 Zohoungbogbo, 'Éditorial: le désert croît,' *ASSALAM*, September 2010, 2.

In Togo, the newspaper *Le Rendez-Vous*,⁹⁸ though not an official AEEMT publication, was largely run by active and former members of the association. An introspective article in the paper outlined its purpose since its launch in 2004:

This newspaper was created with a specific target in mind: the Muslim world. A world suffering from a media void. [...] We created our newspaper to fill this gap while we wait for our [Muslim] union to be sufficiently organised. That's why we have covered all Islamic events since then, especially those organised by the UMT. But we do not limit ourselves to simple reporting because we believe that this world also needs to be corrected. Therefore, in trying to correct a world where people already confuse personal interests with worship, it is normal that some feel victimised by our pen. [...] Those who cannot bear our presence must understand that we are not here to tarnish the image of Islam. [...] But people who claim to be from Islam are so wrong that they need to be told certain truths.⁹⁹

In a provocative article titled 'The UMT, the ruling government and the interests of the Muslim community in Togo', published in 2009, the newspaper boldly criticised the close relationship between the UMT and the government. It unflinchingly stated, 'the Union Musulmane du Togo has been and continues to be a victim of the influence of the ruling power in our country', describing a tactic devised by the late Eyadéma 'to tame our community and manipulate it for his purposes'.¹⁰⁰ Over the years, *Le Rendez-Vous*, known for its uninhibited political commentary and resolutely anti-regime stance, has consistently criticised the UMT, often in harsh terms. The same article lamented that 'the selection of the Union's leaders was more a matter between them and the government than a decision of the community. [...] And this choice was based more on political affiliation than on any other considerations. Elective congresses have often been a sham, poorly disguising predetermined choices.'¹⁰¹

The emergence of an Islamic press led by former Muslim student activists in Benin and Togo underscores the role of media in elite formation and activism. By creating platforms for alternative viewpoints and asserting their presence in the public sphere, these activists have positioned themselves as influential voices within their communities and beyond. Islamic newspapers not only disseminate knowledge and shape religious practices but also critique and challenge established power structures. Furthermore, the media activism of former Muslim student activists extends the skills and experiences gained during their university years. The ability to effectively communicate ideas, mobilise support, and engage

⁹⁸ <https://islam.zmo.de/s/westafrica/item-set/26319>.

⁹⁹ Abdou-Salam, 'La presse islamique mal vue...', *Le Rendez-Vous*, 11 November 2004, 2.

¹⁰⁰ L'UMT, le pouvoir en place...', *Le Rendez-Vous*, 6 September 2009, 2, 5.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

in critical discourse honed within faith-based student associations, translates into their media ventures. Through their newspapers, these activists demonstrate their capacity to analyse and interpret socio-political issues from an Islamic perspective, thereby asserting their legitimacy as Muslim intellectuals. By carving out a distinct space in the media landscape, former Muslim student activists in Benin and Togo have established themselves as a new generation of leaders, capable of shaping public opinion and setting the agenda for their communities. Their ability to combine religious knowledge with secular education and media savvy positions them as a force to be reckoned with.

In both Benin and Togo, former ACEEMUB and AEEMT members, now active in AIMB and ACMT, have made important efforts to address key socio-political issues and spearhead reforms in Muslim umbrella organisations. Their goal is to ensure that these bodies better represent and advocate for the community's interests. These initiatives reflect a growing awareness and proactive stance by these former student activists in shaping the direction and influence of their respective Muslim communities.

The Difficult Task of Reforming Muslim Umbrella Organisations

Benin's Muslim community has historically been fragmented along ethnic, regional, and generational lines, rendering it susceptible to political manipulation. This fragmentation was intensified by power struggles among prominent figures from a few influential families. Efforts to formally organise the community have achieved mixed results. Shortly after independence, several attempts to create a unified Muslim association in Dahomey were thwarted by internal disagreements. However, financial and logistical support from the Muslim World League facilitated the organisation of a national congress in Cotonou in 1966. This congress led to the establishment of the *Union Islamique du Dahomey* (Islamic Union of Dahomey, UID). Despite initial unity, leadership disputes soon caused divisions, culminating in the creation of a rival group, the *Association Dahoméenne pour la Défense des Intérêts de l'Islam* (Dahomean Association for the Defence of Islamic Interests, ADDIS), in Parakou in 1967. The Marxist regime's hostility to non-state organisations hastened the decline of ADDIS in the 1970s. In the 1980s, the regime's more tolerant stance towards religious groups enabled members of the UID to reorganise as such in 1983. The UID quickly gained state recognition and became the official representative body of Islam in Benin.¹⁰²

102 Abdoulaye 2007, 118–24.

The UIB, like its eponymous predecessor, eventually succumbed to inactivity, with only sporadic activity in Borgou.¹⁰³ This lacklustre record, coupled with the democratic renewal, spurred the creation of alternative national federations. In November 1992, the *Conférence Nationale des Associations Islamiques du Bénin* (National Conference of Islamic Associations of Benin, CONAIB-Shoura) was founded, initially bringing together some thirty associations. Under the leadership of Dr Yacouba Fassassi, a former IMF executive, Master of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order¹⁰⁴ in Benin, and macroeconomic advisor to President Kérékou, CONAIB-Shoura aimed to unite the Muslim community and address the shortcomings of the UIB.¹⁰⁵ This new federation received considerable press coverage in the early 1990s, reflecting its initial significance.¹⁰⁶

Despite its initial widespread appeal, CONAIB-Shoura soon became embroiled in controversy, particularly due to Dr Fassassi's leadership, which faced criticism for being politically motivated. In addition, CONAIB-Shoura was perceived by UIB supporters and leaders as a rival entity, especially in the organisation of pilgrimages to Mecca, causing further divisions within the Muslim community. By the mid-1990s, CONAIB-Shoura's influence had significantly waned, leading it into a period of inactivity, mirroring the fate of the UIB.¹⁰⁷ In response to this stagnation, Imam El-Habib founded RAI-Bénin in 2000, as mentioned above. This new initiative, along with organising the CIMEF, aimed to overcome the inertia of the UIB, increase the visibility and influence of the Muslim community in Benin, and improve coordination among various Islamic associations.¹⁰⁸

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, the legitimacy of the UIB remained contentious among many Muslims. A notable pattern within the Islamic Union was the predominance of senior members from influential families in key positions. This was particularly evident in the appointment of imams from the central mosques of Porto-Novo, Cotonou, and Natitingou, who traditionally held the presidency. Although the UIB statutes stipulate a five-year term for executive members, leadership changes mainly occurred due to the death of an incumbent, resulting in effectively lifelong terms. For instance, Imam Liamidi Kélani's presidency lasted from 1983 until his death in 1998, with his successor not officially appointed until 2003,

103 Ibid., 124–26.

104 This Sufi order (or *Tariqa*) originated in Iran.

105 Yacouba Fassassi, in conversation with the author, Porto-Novo, 25 April 2019.

106 Fassassi, 'Tribune libre: les musulmans...', *La Nation*, 14 January 1993; 'Le séminaire sur le Leadership...', *La Nation*, 24 November 1994; Boni Seni, 'Comment promouvoir le...', *La Nation*, 29 November 1994.

107 Abdoulaye 2007, 126–29.

108 Lauriano Kifouli, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 21 March 2019.

leading to almost two decades without a congress. His successor, Imam Mohamed Sanni of Natitingou, served until his death in 2016, delaying the third ordinary congress until 2017.¹⁰⁹ The 2017 congress proposed modernisation measures, including a rotating presidency among imams from Benin's main regions. However, sharp disagreements over these reforms led to a one-year transition period.¹¹⁰

This traditional approach to governance contrasts with the modern, administrative, and bureaucratic vision held by many Western-educated Muslims. A UIB leader noted that representatives of ACEEMUB and AIMB have actively participated in Islamic congresses across West Africa, including in Burkina Faso, Niger, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire. These experiences have underscored the shortcomings of the UIB's founding documents and the need for comprehensive revision.¹¹¹ Leaders of ACEEMUB and AIMB advocate a well-structured UIB with explicit statutory governance, arguing that such an entity would more effectively represent the community's interests in dialogues with the government.

For example, in the pages of *ASSALAM* in 2011, following a poorly managed pilgrimage to Mecca, the president of AIMB criticised the UIB as a 'worrying institution' and 'a thing that serves no purpose at all'. He highlighted the lack of accountability within the UIB leadership as detrimental to the Muslim community in Benin, stating: 'There are some among them who head off to represent the Muslim community and never report back [...] Such positions are treated as an inheritance of sorts. Organisations that give people power for life are of no use to us.'¹¹² Another key challenge for AIMB is the urgent need to improve the capacity of UIB leaders, mostly imams, to analyse and understand societal issues. One member of the *Amicale* contrasted this situation with that of the Christian clergy, noting:

If I take the clergy as an example, someone in a soutane is already an intellectual. He has the ability to analyse and appreciate things. On the other hand, here we have a religious leader of the Muslim community who doesn't understand much about societal issues. That goes some way to explaining the lack of participation of the community in these political debates. It's a question of understanding.¹¹³

Many AIMB Muslim cadres and ACEEMUB students have been keen for the UIB to wield more influence over public authorities. They want the UIB to be more effective in defending the interests of the community. According to a former member

109 Nagnonhou, 'Religion: l'Union islamique...', *La Nation*, 22 May 2017.

110 Abdoul Jalili Yéssoufou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 26 March 2019.

111 Chouaïb Ahmed Chitou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 1 April 2019.

112 Mohktar and Aboudou, 'Le talk du mois,' *ASSALAM*, December 2011, 6–7.

113 Ibrahima Mama Sirou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 8 May 2019.

of ACEEMUB who also worked at the UIB, the younger generation often criticises the UIB for its political stance. As one senior member noted, the Union is perceived as being too supportive of the ruling government. In the past, the Union's leadership has publicly supported the administrations of Presidents Kérékou and Boni Yayi during various socio-political events. This perceived partisanship has led to disapproval among younger members, who argue that the Union should remain neutral. The senior member explained that the UIB's position is rooted in Islamic principles, which advocate obedience to leaders as part of a broader religious duty to respect and honour those in authority. However, this interpretation is not universally accepted, highlighting a generational divide within the Union regarding the appropriate level of political involvement for religious organisations.¹¹⁴

This frustration was particularly evident in 2013 during the widespread protests sparked by rumours that President Boni Yayi intended to amend the constitution to remove the presidential term limit. In August, the CEB issued a pastoral letter opposing the proposed constitutional changes.¹¹⁵ The UIB's subsequent public endorsement of the government's position and its sharp criticism of the Catholic Church's statement as 'an instrumentalisation of religion for hidden goals' caused controversy.¹¹⁶ Prominent Muslim associations and leaders, notably under the *Commission de Réflexion pour l'Unité de la Communauté Musulmane du Bénin* (Reflection Commission for the Unity of the Muslim Community of Benin), openly disavowed the UIB's position in a letter published in several newspapers.¹¹⁷ This action seriously undermined the credibility of the UIB among many Muslims, who suspected its leaders of being politically co-opted by Boni Yayi.

In March 2019, the UIB faced another major crisis due to the postponement of the 2018 Congress, escalating internal tensions, and the controversial political candidacy of Imam Ousmane. Ibrahim Ousmane, a well-known imam at the Central Mosque of Cotonou Jonquet, ran for office in the legislative elections, sparking considerable debate within the Muslim community. This move was particularly controversial given his role as First Vice-President of the UIB. Consequently, two different UIB presidents were rapidly elected within two days, resulting in a split within the UIB. On 30 March in Cotonou, a group of 'dissidents', including AIMB and ACEEMUB leaders, elected the Imam of the Central Mosque of Bohicon as the new leader. However, the following day in Porto-Novo, other Muslim leaders rein-

114 Al Rachid Bawa, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 21 March 2019.

115 'Situation socio-politique: message...', *La Nation*, 20 August 2013.

116 'Situation socioéconomique délétère...', *Fraternité*, 23 August 2013.

117 'Supposée réponse au clergé...', *La Nouvelle Tribune*, 25 August 2013.

stated Assifatou Mohamed Ali and Ousmane as president and vice-president.¹¹⁸ The impasse was finally resolved at a high-level reconciliation meeting chaired by President Talon on 15 April,¹¹⁹ with Mahmoud Riadds Sidi of the AIMB playing a key mediation role.¹²⁰ This reconciliation was formalised at the Fourth UIB Congress in June 2019.¹²¹

While the Muslim community in Benin has struggled to establish a unified representative body, the situation in Togo has been markedly different. As outlined in Chapter 2, Eyadéma effectively co-opted key Muslim leaders through the UMT, established in 1963 as the official representative of the Muslim community to this day. The UMT seeks to 'regroup all the Muslims of the territory in order to orient them towards a practice of Islam that is more in line with the development of the modern world' and to 'break with the old Islamic traditions that do not correspond to orthodox Islam.'¹²²

However, much like in Benin, ACMT activists have encountered significant challenges in their efforts to reform the UMT and push for greater transparency and accountability to the needs of the Muslim community. The UMT's deep integration into the national power structure and its role as an extension of the ruling party have made it difficult for these reformers to effect change. Influential political figures, including former ministers and allies of the regime, have historically led the UMT, consolidating its political allegiance. For example, Mama Fousséni, a founding member of the UMT and its president from 1970 to 1972, and later honorary president, joined the RPT's political bureau and served as a minister under Eyadéma.¹²³ Kassim Mensah, a key founder and former president of the UMT,¹²⁴ maintained close ties with Eyadéma and, as mentioned above, was appointed Togo's first ambassador to Libya in 1976.¹²⁵ This alignment has transformed the UMT into an organisation that closely supports state interests, with the government intervening in its affairs to ensure loyalty and political compliance.

During the turbulent transition to democracy in 1990 and the subsequent return to authoritarian rule in 1991, the UMT remained notably silent, failing to

118 Kingbèwé, 'Bénin: crise à l'Union...', *Banouto*, 1 April 2019.

119 SRTB, 'Patrice Talon initie une rencontre de réconciliation avec l'Union islamique du Bénin,' uploaded 16 April 2019.

120 Lawson, 'Talon désamorce la crise...', *La Nouvelle Tribune*, 16 April 2019.

121 For a detailed analysis of this case, see Madore 2022a.

122 'Création de l'union musulmane du Togo (UMT),' accessed 9 January 2023. On the beginnings of the UMT, see Delval 1980, 208–24.

123 Apédo-Amah, 'Après son élévation à la dignité...', *Togo-Presse*, 19 January 1978.

124 Ouro-Sama 2018.

125 'M. Kassim est parti pour Tripoli,' *Togo-Presse*, 15 January 1977.

offer substantial political or doctrinal guidance. This era of political instability coincided with internal discord at the UMT, exacerbated by the 1992 congress. In March of that year, former UMT leaders led by Mensah met with the Prime Minister to address the ‘ongoing confusion’ plaguing the organisation.¹²⁶ By May, over twenty imams backing the new UMT leadership had issued a statement in response to media reports of severe internal conflicts. They asserted, ‘For some time now, as everyone knows, Islamic affairs have been managed by people who have neither the training nor the necessary competence in religious matters and who, in order to maintain their position against all odds, have done everything possible to politicise the Muslim Union, disregarding the injunctions of the Holy Qur’an.’¹²⁷ However, this internal turmoil did not prevent the UMT from maintaining its support for the regime. In 2002, during the celebrations of the 35th anniversary of national liberation, the UMT president declared: ‘Unfortunately, since 5 October 1990 [*tracts mensongers*’ affair], those who are jealous of our achievements, under the false guise of democrats, have tried to disrupt our peaceful march of progress.’ He assured Eyadéma of the unwavering support of the Muslim community and prayed to Allah to help him continue his mission.¹²⁸

The UMT leadership faced another challenge following the well-regarded tenure of Ahmed Tétou (2004–07),¹²⁹ whose qualities were acknowledged even by the typically critical newspaper *Le Rendez-Vous*.¹³⁰ His sudden death in 2007 triggered a new leadership crisis. Vice-president Inoussa Bouraïma, also the mentor to the AEEMT (see Chapter 3), assumed the role of interim president. However, the prolonged nature of his interim leadership and the UMT’s failure to convene a congress to elect new leaders caused significant unrest among Togolese Muslims. Many questioned whether the UMT, still the government’s only official Muslim interlocutor, genuinely represented their interests. There was also growing discontent with the UMT’s perceived alignment with the current political regime. As during Eyadéma’s era, Faure Gnassingbé’s regime continued to rely on UMT leaders, particularly the influential UMT Advisory Council. This council includes several prominent figures from Eyadéma’s administration: Fambaré Ouattara Natchaba, former speaker of the National Assembly (2000–05); Barry Moussa Barqué, who held various ministerial posts between 1979 and 1999 and has been an adviser to the president since 1999; and Mohamed Atcha Titikpina, former commander of Eyadéma’s Presiden-

126 Amouzou, ‘Au palais de l’Entente...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 17 March 1992.

127 ‘Lettre ouverte des imams aux anciens...,’ *Courrier du Golfe*, 11 May 1992.

128 Blande, ‘35e anniversaire de la Libération...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 13 January 2002.

129 Lemou, ‘Congrès ordinaire de l’Union Musulmane...,’ *Togo-Presse*, 11 October 2004.

130 ‘Le président de l’Union Musulmane...,’ *Le Rendez-Vous*, 12 July 2007, 2–4.

tial Guard Commando Regiment and Chief of Staff of the Togolese Armed Forces (2010–13).

To revitalise the UMT and strengthen the unity of the Muslim community, the ACMT organised a reflection session in 2013 at the mosque on the University of Lomé campus. Themed 'The Contribution of Muslims to the Relaunch of UMT Activities', the meeting convened delegates from around fifteen Islamic associations. Yaya Assadou Kolani, former AEEMT president and ACMT leader from 2010 to 2018, emphasised the need for new leadership and the urgency of holding the long-overdue UMT congress: 'This meeting is a long-awaited opportunity given the expectations of the members of our various associations regarding the role that our supreme institution [UMT] should play in coordinating and managing Islamic activities nationwide.' Discussions highlighted numerous obstacles facing Togo's Muslim associations, such as leadership conflicts, political and economic dependencies, a lack of coherent vision and organisation, and challenges in reconciling Islamic faith with contemporary societal issues. A special committee was established to advance these dialogues and work towards organising the delayed UMT Congress.¹³¹

In a follow-up meeting the next month, leaders of 25 Islamic associations collectively endorsed a petition criticising the current UMT leadership. They condemned the leadership for its inaction and demanded the congress be organised within three months. The president of the organising committee declared, 'Our community must not be left behind due to the carelessness or inaction of a few individuals.'¹³² Despite the ACMT's efforts to engage in the restructuring of the UMT, its influence was significantly hindered by the entrenched power of the UMT's Consultative Council, which resisted the ACMT's proposed reforms. Confronted with these obstacles, the ACMT eventually withdrew from the process, recognising the futility of its attempts within a framework that appeared to prioritise government loyalty over genuine community representation.¹³³

Amid the socio-political turmoil of 2017–18, the ACMT demonstrated leadership, contrasting sharply with the UMT. Unlike the Catholic bishops, who openly criticised the government's democratic shortcomings, the UMT's calls for peace and refusal to support the protesters' demands for reform, under the guise of political neutrality, led to a significant erosion of its credibility. This was particularly evident among the younger generation, who disapproved of the UMT's unwavering loyalty to the state. During this period, the ACMT's public statements were notably influential. In October, it issued a 'Statement on the Current Socio-Political Situa-

¹³¹ Dosseh, 'Redynamiser l'UMT pour la défense...', *Le Rendez-Vous*, 20 June 2013, 7.

¹³² 'Les musulmans du Togo signent...', *Le Rendez-Vous*, 11 July 2013, 4.

¹³³ Yaya Assadou Kolani and AEEMT leader, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 15 May 2019.

tion in Togo', reaffirming the right to peaceful protest as a fundamental democratic right and expressing concern about reported violence by security forces in several cities. The statement also called for essential political reforms to promote development, human rights, better living conditions, and social harmony.¹³⁴ Shortly afterwards, the ACMT demanded the immediate release of Imam Alfa Hassan Mollah (Mohamed Alassani Djobo) of Sokodé, known for his proximity to Atchadam, the main opposition figure at the time.¹³⁵ In December 2018, the ACMT joined the Togo Bishops' Conference, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Togo, and the Methodist Church of Togo in calling for the legislative elections to be postponed. This call for postponement and the resumption of dialogue to ensure fair and transparent elections¹³⁶ was even relayed by RFI.¹³⁷

Kolani revealed that ACMT leaders had struggled with the decision to intervene publicly, having traditionally relied on the UMT to represent the community. However, the tense socio-political climate compelled them to voice their concerns. This newfound assertiveness caused tensions with the UMT but garnered substantial support within the Muslim community and strengthened their resolve. The ACMT joined *Espérance pour le Togo* (Hope for Togo), an interfaith civil society movement aimed at highlighting pressing national issues. In December 2018, ACMT members were among the delegates from *Espérance pour le Togo* who met with the President of Ghana, the facilitator of the Togolese political dialogue. The overall goal was to encourage the Muslim community to play a more active role in public discourse, prioritising ethical and civic responsibilities without exploiting religion for political ends.¹³⁸

Aware of Togo's volatile political environment, the ACMT has adopted a cautious approach to political engagement, focusing on Islamic values and principles, as its membership spans the political spectrum. However, this stance has created internal tensions within the association. The ACMT's involvement, particularly its stance on the 2018 legislative elections and its participation in the mediation meeting in Ghana, has drawn the ire of the Togolese authorities. According to ACMT leaders, President Faure Gnassingbé, previously unaware of the ACMT, perceived it as a dissident organisation.¹³⁹ This perception led to a reduction in government

134 Kolani, 'Déclaration sur la situation socio politique actuelle du Togo,' accessed 27 June 2024.

135 'Les cadres musulmans exigent la libération immédiate de l'Imam arrêté,' accessed 2 November 2017.

136 'Voici la position de l'ACMT face à la situation qui prévaut dans notre pays,' accessed 27 June 2024.

137 Dogbé, 'Togo: les responsables musulmans...,' *RFI*, 8 December 2018.

138 Yaya Assadou Kolani and AEEMT leader, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 15 May 2019.

139 Latifou Assikpa, Ouro Padna Essoh Izotou and Halourou Maman, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 19 May 2019.

support, including withdrawal of office space allocated to the ACMT in the Hajj House in Lomé. Additionally, relations with pro-government members of the ACMT became strained, and support for key projects, such as the construction of the association's headquarters, diminished.¹⁴⁰

The response to the ACMT's initiatives underlines the complexity of Togo's political environment, in which open expression of political views, particularly critical ones, is fraught with risk. This is exemplified by the experience of Taofik Bonfoh, a prominent ACMT member. Bonfoh faced intense scrutiny and family tensions, precisely because of his connections to the political establishment – notably his grandfather Abass Bonfoh's role as Togo's acting president in 2005 after Eyadéma's death. Bonfoh's case, where he was perceived as opposing the ruling regime despite his family's political ties, illustrates the widespread reluctance to engage publicly in political matters. The ACMT is currently debating whether to continue commenting on political issues, given the associated risks. Bonfoh noted that the ACMT has received proposals from various opposition parties but has deliberately avoided any alliances, preferring to maintain its autonomy. This cautious approach is necessary in Togo's restrictive political climate, in which freedom of expression about political issues is severely limited.¹⁴¹

This chapter has highlighted the role of universities as incubators for new religious elites and innovative forms of faith-based engagement in Benin and Togo. By examining the post-university trajectories of former activists from Christian and Islamic student associations, we have uncovered the enduring impact of the 'social curriculum' offered by these groups, which extends far beyond formal education. For many of these former students, their activism does not end with graduation. Alumni of these associations often continue their faith-based activism by moving into roles within networks such as RAJEC, AIMB, and ACMT to pursue their religious commitments in the workplace.

The divergent paths taken by former Christian and Muslim student activists in their socio-political engagement reveal complex dynamics at the intersection of religion, civil society, and democratisation. Christian activists, particularly those from JEC backgrounds, have largely aligned themselves with established church hierarchies, often remaining in the shadow of their Bishops' Conference. Former Bible group members have generally eschewed direct political involvement, viewing the political arena as morally compromised. In contrast, Muslim activists, drawing on both secular and Islamic knowledge, have actively sought to reshape their communities' religious and organisational structures. Organisations like AIMB in Benin

140 Taofik Bonfoh, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

141 Ibid.

and ACMT in Togo have evolved from cautious beginnings into influential voices in national discourse, demonstrating a more assertive approach to civic engagement.

These contrasting trajectories highlight the challenges of fostering an inclusive and pluralistic civil society in contexts in which religious identities significantly shape access to power and influence. The entrepreneurial focus cultivated within faith-based student associations has given rise to a new type of religious elite, blending religious legitimacy with professional competence and business acumen. While this entrepreneurial turn in religious activism holds potential for innovative solutions to social problems, it also raises critical questions about social justice, inclusion, and the nature of democratic participation in these societies. The chapter underscores the importance of understanding universities not just as sites of academic learning, but as crucial spaces for the development of civic skills, social capital, and alternative forms of political imagination. The experiences of these former activists challenge simplistic narratives about the role of religion in public life.

As we look ahead to the final chapter, which examines recent developments on both campuses, including the perception of declining religious activism among current students, we are prompted to consider the evolving dynamics of campus activism and their implications for the future of civic engagement in Benin and Togo. The shifting landscape of student activism may signal broader changes in how young people conceptualise their roles as citizens and agents of social change, with potentially far-reaching consequences for the political and religious landscapes of both countries.

7 ‘Too Young’, ‘Immature’, and not Committed Enough: The Decline of Faith-Based Student Organisations?

Faith-based student movements have been integral to campus life at the University of Lomé and the University of Abomey-Calavi since the 1970s. However, many former activists in both Benin and Togo now perceive these organisations as being at a critical juncture. The final chapter evaluates the current state of faith-based activism on these campuses, focusing on the narratives of past and present actors while critically examining claims of decline. The apparent waning of religious student movements raises questions about the long-term impact and sustainability of initiatives that bridge the gap between academic education and professional demands. This perceived decline, attributed not only to COVID-19 measures but also to broader shifts in student priorities and societal values, warrants closer examination.

While compelling, narratives of decline often reflect a generational bias that can obscure the complex realities of social change and adaptation. Rather than a straightforward decline, we may be witnessing a transformation of faith-based student activism, shaped by societal shifts, technological advancements, and evolving student priorities. This chapter unpacks these narratives, exploring both the perceived decline and the underlying factors driving changes in student engagement with religious organisations on campus. Masquelier and Soares argue that understanding youth negotiation within the generational order requires an examination of the interplay of power, knowledge, morality, and authority.¹ Different cohorts of activists, each shaped by unique historical experiences, utilise the past in varying ways to pursue contemporary goals. The invocation of morality and virtue from particular generational perspectives often leads to intergenerational divisions.²

The chapter is structured in three parts. First, it explores former members’ reflections on the current landscape of campus faith-based associations, including critiques of student maturity. Second, it presents more nuanced analyses from other activists and current students, contextualising evolving student activism within broader university changes. Finally, it examines new challenges, including less accommodating university authorities, stricter applications of *laïcité*, the per-

1 Masquelier and Soares 2016, 15.

2 Whyte, Alber and van der Geest 2008.

ceived influence of Freemasonry, competition from endogenous religions in Benin, and the strategies adopted by Christian and Islamic associations to navigate these challenges.

By examining diverse perspectives and broader institutional and societal contexts, this chapter illuminates the challenges and opportunities facing faith-based student movements in an increasingly individualistic and digitalised world. It cautions against a linear view of increasing campus religiosity post-1990s, instead highlighting the interplay of generational shifts, university policies, and societal changes in shaping faith-based student activism in Benin and Togo. As formal education systems evolve to meet changing labour market and societal needs, the role and influence of faith-based groups on campus may require reassessment. This chapter provides a nuanced understanding of the current landscape, offering insights into the future trajectory of these student movements.

7.1 A Bleak Picture: Former Activists Look at the Current Generation on Campus

In recent years, Christian and Muslim student associations at UL and UAC have witnessed a notable decline in activism. This trend, bemoaned by leaders past and present, manifests in dwindling student participation and engagement. Today's students seem less inclined to actively involve themselves, prioritising academic achievement over extracurricular pursuits and exhibiting reluctance to volunteer without direct financial incentives. Several factors contribute to this shift in engagement. The influx of younger, less mature university entrants has altered student demographics. Moreover, social media's pervasive influence has not only reshaped societal values, emphasising material gain over selfless service, but also eroded religious values and moral standards among students. This changing landscape affects both faith-based groups and secular student unions, reflecting broader shifts in student priorities and perspectives.

A Waning Spirit of Activism

Former activists lament the current cohort's lack of involvement. Despite high 'official' membership figures, actual participation – measured by active engagement and the assumption of leadership roles – remains markedly limited across both Christian and Muslim associations. A JEC-U leader from the 1990s, now a professor at the University of Lomé, observes that today's *Jécistes* lack the visibility and dynamism of their predecessors. Paradoxically, they have access to more resources,

such as social media, yet the burden of initiative rests squarely on alumni shoulders. ‘I am no longer a student. So I can’t lead the JEC. [...] They have to wake up’, he asserts.³ Another ex-leader echoes these sentiments, noting a stark decline in students’ willingness and availability. This is evidenced by dwindling attendance at JEC national camps, a concerning trend, especially considering the ‘thousand conveniences’ available to today’s students. He reflects, ‘In the 2000s, we lacked lights, security guards, paved roads, or Wi-Fi on campus – amenities unimaginable in our time.’ He adds, ‘Now, with WhatsApp, cancelling an appointment takes mere minutes. In our day, you’d have to call the chaplaincy’s landline.’⁴ Sedoufio, who led the JEC-U at UL from 2017, also witnessed a sharp decline in active membership – those who had paid their dues – from 267 to 138 during his tenure. He attributes this to the current generation’s focus on academic pursuits and degree attainment, which overshadow extracurricular involvement and activism in student associations.⁵

This decline in engagement extends beyond mere numbers. Clotaire Deguenon, another former JEC leader, attributes this waning activism to the evolving nature of communication and interaction among members. He recalls a time when the absence of mobile phones and social media fostered a stronger sense of fraternity and unity among *Jécistes*. Members were more inclined to meet in person, creating a vibrant, dynamic movement that thrived on physical presence and direct engagement. Deguenon vividly remembers his tenure as a diocesan leader, traversing Cotonou on his motorbike to distribute correspondence and check on various cells – an activity that invigorated the group. In stark contrast, today’s reliance on digital platforms like WhatsApp, while efficient, erodes the fraternal spirit that once defined the JEC. Virtual meetings and organisational activities, though convenient, lack the warmth and immediacy of face-to-face interactions. This shift has not only diminished the cohesion among members but also diluted the impact of their actions on the ground, with the practical, tangible engagement that once mobilised members and facilitated lively debates now conspicuously absent.⁶

Jean Ezékiel Adigbe, the outgoing JEC president in Benin, despite being only slightly older than the current generation, acknowledges this significant decline in student activism. He points to external influences, particularly social media, as diverting attention from the values championed by organisations like the JEC. The allure of instant wealth and internet fame propagated by influencers overshadows the appeal of associations demanding time and dedication, leading to a dimin-

3 Sabin Sonhaye, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

4 Michel Oni Djagnikpo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 23 August 2021.

5 Raymond Sedoufio, in conversation with the author, Google Meet call, 10 November 2022.

6 Clotaire Deguenon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

ished sense of sacrifice and commitment among young people.⁷ Camille Agbeva, the current JEC head, concurs, highlighting social media's impact on perceptions of volunteering. With a prevailing focus on immediate financial gain, students are increasingly reluctant to commit to lengthy meetings or training sessions without direct monetary incentives. This shift necessitates exploring new methods to effectively attract and engage them.⁸

The phenomenon is not limited to Christian associations. Former ACEEMUB members at the University of Abomey-Calavi echo similar sentiments. A member of ACEEMUB's National Council, comprising former activists, emphasised the organisation's struggle with the 'challenge of a declining commitment'.⁹ An alumnus, now employed by the UAC, observed a sharp decline in Muslim student involvement over the past decade, lamenting that 'self-giving is losing value'. He recalled a time when commitment was so strong that students would walk considerable distances to participate in activities or to meet with donors, unaided by motorbikes, cars, or taxi fare.¹⁰ The outgoing Secretary General of GBEEB reflected on this stark contrast: a five-kilometre walk was commonplace, whereas today's students balk at even two kilometres, opting instead to pay for a *Zémidjan*.¹¹

A former Amir (2010–13) of the AEEMT highlighted a critical 'lack of human resources' within the organisation. He observed a stark contrast between online engagement and actual participation: while many members actively discuss AEEMT governance in digital forums, only a handful are willing to undertake the necessary work. This reluctance is exacerbated by an increasing focus on personal business ventures, diverting time and interest away from student associations. The former Amir expressed deep concern about the waning spirit of volunteering, noting a paradigm shift from the past ethos of selfless service to God to a prevailing expectation of financial reward:

Activities that we and our older brothers performed voluntarily [*façon bénévole*] now come with financial expectations. Today's youth require compensation for transport and fuel. [...] In the past, people acted for God, sacrificing themselves without expectation. Now, the financial aspect has become paramount, eroding the concept of pure volunteerism [*bénévolat sec sec*]. We've transitioned to a form of paid volunteerism [*volontariat*]. Engaging young people now necessitates monetary incentives. [...] Consequently, the sincerity and intention behind these actions have significantly diminished.¹²

7 Camille Agbeva and Jean Ezékiel Adigbe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 4 March 2022.

8 Ibid.

9 Mouhamed Ehi-Olou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 22 April 2019.

10 Bourhanou-Dine Mamam Awali, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 18 April 2019.

11 Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

12 Taofik Bonfoh, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

The AEEMT Congress in December 2019 further illuminated these ongoing challenges. Abdoul Aziz Gountante, a recent admittee to the *École nationale d'administration* (National School of Administration, ENA), was reluctantly persuaded to assume the role of Amir. The decision underscored the perceived inadequacies of the younger generation, described as ‘very bad’ (*craint beaucoup*). Despite the elders offering coaching to help Gountante balance his studies and activism, the underlying issues persisted. This was evident at the 2022 Congress, where, in an unprecedented move, Gountante was reappointed Amir for another two-year term – a first in AEEMT’s history.¹³ Gountante’s journey with the AEEMT, beginning in Dapaong in 2003 and including a period of inactivity before his eventual rise to leadership,¹⁴ reflects the organisation’s struggle to attract and retain committed leaders from newer generations. This pattern of discontinuous engagement and difficulty in finding willing successors epitomises the broader challenge faced by student associations in maintaining organisational continuity and vitality.

The JEC in Benin faces similar challenges. Deguenon notes a general disinterest among members in assuming positions of responsibility, a phenomenon unheard of in his time:

At their recent National Congress, they failed to elect the National Executive Committee due to lack of quorum. So an interim committee was set up, which has never happened in our time. On the contrary, we used to fight for leadership positions. This is where the *Jécistes* get their political training. We took action. We negotiated. We initiated different strategies to take on leadership roles. As a result, a lot of politicians came from our ranks, but we don’t see that anymore. There isn’t even much enthusiasm for leadership. It’s quite strange.¹⁵

The decline in student activism is not solely attributed to changing attitudes towards leadership and volunteerism. A former member of the JEC-U at the UAC identifies several contributing factors. Chief among these is the intensifying employment challenges facing today’s youth, leaving them overwhelmed and directionless. While acknowledging that such problems existed in his era, he notes their increased severity today. Moreover, he points to a significant societal shift: the waning inclination to serve others. The concept of selfless dedication to the common good, once a cornerstone of activism, appears to be fading. Reflecting on his time in the JEC, he recalled how student members’ belief in the cause led them to personally fund activities. Their focus extended beyond discussion and prayer to concrete action, such as providing free tutoring for exam classes led by senior

¹³ AEEMT, ‘Journal du congrès - N° 4,’ uploaded 3 January 2022.

¹⁴ Aziz Gountante, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 5 August 2021.

¹⁵ Clotaire Deguenon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

members – a form of evangelism through action. In contrast, today's youth exhibit a noticeable lack of self-sacrifice:

The gift of self, activism, all this is lacking because today's young person questions what they can gain by investing time in others. He himself has so many problems to deal with. He says to himself, if I take this time that I'm giving to others, I could have done this or that. He fails to see the inherent value of such investment, unlike us who worked without focusing on personal gain. The youth today have never considered what they themselves might gain by investing in the movement.¹⁶

This decline in activism is not limited to faith-based groups but extends to secular student unions as well. In Benin, there has been a significant restructuring of student representation within universities under Talon's government. An October 2017 decree redefined how student organisations interact with state and university authorities, requiring a minimum of 30% of the vote for a union to be officially recognised as a student representative. The impact of this change was evident in the July 2018 elections at the UAC, where only UNSEB and FNEB met this requirement, with a mere 18.13% turnout among 63,308 eligible voters. The press also noted the general lack of interest among students.¹⁷ The situation deteriorated further in 2021, with an even lower turnout in subsequent elections. Despite winning a 69.36% share, the leading FNEB failed to attract even 5,000 votes.¹⁸ This declining electoral engagement mirrors the broader trend of waning student activism.

A similar pattern of declining activism is observable in Togo. Even at the University of Lomé campus, once renowned for its student strikes, the last significant movements date back to 2018. This lull in student protest activity at a historically active campus further underscores the widespread nature of this trend across the region, suggesting a broader shift in student engagement and activism. This potential decline in traditional forms of activism echoes Soares and Leblanc's observations on the religious engagement of young Muslims in West Africa since the 1990s. They note that, while the 1990s saw significant mobilisation of Muslim youth through formal structures like national, regional, and neighbourhood associations, alongside political parties, the narrative shifted after 2000. This pivot marked a trend towards a more personalised Islamic identity, termed the 'moralisation of the self', emphasising an individualised spiritual journey.¹⁹

¹⁶ Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 11 March 2022.

¹⁷ Adjimehossou, 'Election des organisations faitières...', *Fraternité*, 10 July 2018.

¹⁸ Hounghbadji, 'Bénin: résultats définitifs de...', *Benin Web TV*, 2 August 2021.

¹⁹ Soares and LeBlanc 2015.

While student activism's decline is apparent across various organisations, former leaders identify deeper underlying factors beyond changing engagement and communication patterns. They pinpoint issues of maturity and shifting values as pivotal contributors to this trend. The following section examines how the decreasing age of university entrants and perceived erosion of religious principles are reshaping student involvement.

Immaturity and Eroding Religious Values

A former CIUB activist, the predecessor of ACEEMUB, suggests the issue stems more from immaturity than lack of motivation. He attributes this to students now entering university at younger ages.²⁰ A former AEEMT Amir concurs, recalling that in his era, most students were over 20 upon enrolment, whereas many are now merely 16 or 17. He questions whether similar results can be achieved given this disparity in maturity levels.²¹ Another ex-AEEMT leader agrees, noting younger students' lack of effective leadership skills. He contrasts the older, more capable students of the past, who could organise efficiently, with the current younger cohort requiring guidance themselves.²² ACEEMUB's first president also emphasises maturity as a critical concern, linking it to premature university entry. This early immersion into university life, coupled with hasty assumption of responsibility, often leads to trivialising important issues, resulting in less effective association participation. Moreover, this immaturity correlates directly with declining commitment, indicating a clear relationship between maturity levels and the quality of student activism.²³

Two former GBEEB general secretaries highlight the immaturity issue among today's university students. One observes that students are 'still teenagers' upon arrival, lamenting, 'we don't have mature people, adults, to work with like we did in the past.'²⁴ These young University Bible Group members 'have a different language'.²⁵ A former CIUB member adds that younger students at all educational levels struggle with issues previously handled with relative ease.²⁶ Supporting this perspective, a RAJEC member argues that younger age affects not only students' maturity but also their 'intellectual capacity' to comprehend and engage with JEC

²⁰ Ibrahima Mama Sirou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 8 May 2019.

²¹ Yaya Assadou Kolani and AEEMT leader, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 15 May 2019.

²² Ibrahima Ouro-Gouni, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 August 2021.

²³ Ambdel Gannille Inoussa, in conversation with the author, WhatsApp call, 14 March 2022.

²⁴ Jacob Djossou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 19 March 2022.

²⁵ Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

²⁶ Ibrahima Mama Sirou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 8 May 2019.

offerings. This lack of understanding and experience significantly hinders meaningful involvement in student associations.²⁷ A former JEC-U member, now a University of Lomé professor, bemoans that 'the JEC is increasingly seen by many young people as a place to have fun, rather than a place for training. [...] Discipline, rigour, and work are all part of the JEC. [...] I don't have the impression that the new generations are being trained in this respect.'²⁸

Current GBEEB leaders also observe a significant shift due to the younger age of university students. Thrust into an environment demanding responsibility beyond their preparation, these students often exhibit reluctance to take initiative and rely heavily on parental guidance. This demographic shift has necessitated changes in educational materials and teaching methods. A notable example is the adaptation of their Biblical studies curricula, originally designed to engage students at a higher intellectual level. These materials have been revised to suit the younger, less mature university population. The original linguistic complexity, intended to reflect the movement's intellectual aspirations, proved too challenging for these younger students.²⁹

The discourse on decreasing university entry age extends beyond student association leaders' insights; it permeates Beninese and Togolese social narratives. A 2021 news article highlighted Togolese universities' increasingly youthful demographics:

Togo's student population is getting younger each year. The era of '*Cartouchard students*'—those who lingered for years—has passed. Now, very young girls and boys enter Togo's public and private universities. In the past, people of a certain age went to university. They were already 'worn out' by years of primary and secondary education. These older men and women had to struggle, after multiple attempts, to obtain their baccalaureate [...]. Today's situation is markedly different. Not only are there more students, but they are also younger. This shift stems from recent demographic explosion and the extreme youthfulness of the Togolese population. Consequently, we see teenagers or those barely out of their teens roaming university campuses. [...] Indeed, it appears that today's students breeze through secondary school. Many avoid repeating years, unlike their predecessors who sometimes attempted the BAC II two, three, four, five or even seven times.³⁰

27 Emile Eteka, Elvis Vitoule and Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

28 Théophile Tonyeme, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 7 September 2021.

29 Hake Chabi Assa, Fabrice Hounkpevi and Angelo Klanclounon, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 March 2022.

30 'Enseignement supérieur/Togo....', *Le Nouveau Reporter*, 12 February 2021.

Beyond immaturity concerns, former activists have noted a shift in moral values and diminishing regard for religious principles among students. A JEC pioneer in Benin believes today's youth are increasingly influenced by the 'New Age movement', characterised by diverse ideologies and spiritualities that often prioritise human deification and deny God's existence. University students are seen as particularly vulnerable targets for these ideologies, strategically disseminated near campuses. Their precariousness makes them more susceptible, leading them to explore various ideas that may not satisfy their spiritual needs.³¹ Echoing this sentiment, two RAJEC members observe that young people are not insulated from societal influences. Many students today gravitate towards activities offering immediate material rewards rather than those providing education or intellectual enrichment. The prevailing youth culture's obsession with material acquisition overshadows the perceived long-term benefits of intellectual and spiritual development. This phenomenon is exacerbated by social media personalities' influence and cybercrime's appeal, contributing to a general decline in activism and reduced involvement in religious groups, including the JEC.³²

The influence of social media on today's students, often viewed negatively, is a concern shared not only by faith-based association activists but also echoed in the broader social discourse in both countries. In September 2023, an article in *La Nation* delved into the negative effects of social media addiction, illustrating how widespread internet and social network use can alter young people's attitudes and expose them to harm. This excessive online presence can lead to risky behaviour and a decline in moral standards. As one sociologist warned, it can result in 'a deprivation of morals and a challenge to the education received at home'.³³ Another article raised concerns about moral decay in Beninese society, citing instances of young people sharing compromising photos or videos online, challenging social norms of modesty. Smartphones facilitate access to such content, while provocative posts by influencers seeking to increase their audience accelerate this moral decline and undermine parental efforts to uphold cultural values.³⁴ Similarly, in Togo, public opinion is wary of social media's mixed effects. An article in *Nouvelle Opinion* critiqued the once-celebrated benefits of social media against its real consequences, highlighting worrying trends among young people active on popular

³¹ Pacôme Elet, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

³² Emile Eteka, Elvis Vitoule and Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

³³ Lantefo, 'Jeunes et réseaux sociaux...', *La Nation*, 13 September 2023.

³⁴ Quenum, 'Déprivation des mœurs au Bénin: quand le téléphone Android devient une source de perversion,' accessed 6 February 2024.

platforms. These concerns include changes in dress codes, behaviour, and attitudes, as well as the dissemination of explicit content, including personal intimate moments.³⁵

As highlighted by the RAJEC member, cybercrime poses a major challenge in Benin. The term '*Gayman*' commonly refers to cybercriminals, a label dating back to early scams in which young people, including students and school dropouts, posed as homosexuals to defraud individuals from Western countries. Since the early 2000s, the scope of cybercrime in Benin has expanded significantly to include a wide range of online illegal activities, from fraudulent schemes to sextortion, making it a lucrative operation.³⁶ To combat this growing problem, the Beninese government has intensified its efforts by establishing specialised agencies,³⁷ resulting in the imprisonment of over 1,000 people for cybercrime between 2020 and 2023.³⁸ Amidst these developments, in May 2022, the Bishops of Benin expressed deep concern about the growing tendency among young people to seek quick wealth. They observed a significant moral decline among the younger generation, highlighted in the Bishops' Conference's final communiqué, which pointed to widespread problems such as fraud, the trivialisation of sexual content on social media, and acts motivated 'by the lure of easy gain' and 'committed with contempt for human dignity'.³⁹

It is worth noting that this discourse of generational decline is not unique to faith-based student organisations. Similar narratives of youth disengagement and moral decay permeate various sectors of social life, from politics to education to the workplace. This 'degenerative discourse' often reflects broader societal anxieties about change and can be traced throughout history.⁴⁰ Understanding this context helps us to critically examine these narratives and look beyond them to the underlying social dynamics at play.

Historically, Christian and Islamic associations on university campuses have addressed concerns about students' moral and ethical behaviour. However, recent years have also seen student unions and university authorities increasingly engaging with these issues. In June 2016, a notable development occurred when the three main student unions at the University of Abomey-Calavi – FNEB, UNEB, and UNSEB

35 Antarou, 'Mauvais usage des réseaux sociaux...', *Nouvelle Opinion*, 3 July 2023.

36 Tasso 2014; Akodande Honma 2022.

37 Linkpon, 'CNIN: un Centre d'investigations numériques pour la lutte anti-cybercriminalité,' accessed 26 January 2024.

38 Linkpon, 'Cybercriminalité au Bénin: l'inquiétant bilan chiffré de la traque,' accessed 22 September 2023.

39 Eblotié, 'Bénin: l'épiscopat appelle...', *La Croix Africa*, 20 May 2022.

40 Mannheim 1952.

– introduced a strict dress code, specifically targeting clothing deemed indecent or provocative among female students. The student union leaders emphatically declared: ‘Students, it is formally forbidden to wear tights, mini-skirts, mini-dresses, mini-jeans and other indecent and reprehensible outfits at UAC. No to the corruption of morals! No to acculturation! No to blind Western imitation! Long live our Mecca of knowledge and education!’⁴¹

This dress code sparked considerable debate among the student body. Rumours circulated that Rector Brice Sinsin supported its enforcement, with the tacit approval of the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, adding to the controversy. However, the university administration unequivocally denied these rumours. In a statement aimed at clarifying the situation, the rectorate distanced itself from the memo entitled ‘Ban on sexy dress for women and girls at the University of Abomey-Calavi’ and denied any involvement. The administration urged an end to rumours and called on the university community to maintain a climate of calm.⁴²

While initial efforts by student union leaders to enforce a dress code at the UAC struggled to gain administrative support, the initiative has seen a resurgence under the current rector, Félicien Avlessi. Taking a firm stance, Rector Avlessi has recently declared strict enforcement of a dress code, targeting what he perceives as moral decline within the campus community. On 21 October 2022, he issued a statement specifying unacceptable clothing on university premises, such as low-rise trousers, tank tops, skirts cut above the knee, miniskirts, clothing with excessive slits, and low-cut tops. Avlessi’s directive, which emphasises the UAC’s educational mission and the maintenance of ethical standards, warns that students violating these norms will be dismissed from class and ‘sent home to their parents’, applying the policy uniformly to all students regardless of gender.⁴³ This renewed emphasis on a strict dress code has sparked conversations and debate not only within the student body but across Beninese society, reflecting broader concerns about values, identity, and the role of educational institutions in shaping societal norms.

The University of Kara in Togo has also taken steps to regulate student dress by introducing a dress code in January 2021. This policy emphasises the importance of appropriate dress as a component of educational and professional readiness. While uniforms are not required for all except those in professional programmes, the university insists that students’ attire during academic sessions meets certain

41 ‘Le port de tenues sexy et indécentes...’, *Les 4 Vérités*, 15 June 2016.

42 Hessoun, ‘Affaire interdiction des tenues...’, *La Nouvelle Tribune*, 15 June 2016.

43 ‘Uac: le port des tenues...’, *Le Matinal*, 25 October, 2022; Hounghbadji, ‘UAC: ‘les étudiants en tenues...’, *Benin Web TV*, 28 October 2022.

standards. In a published column, the university's Directorate of Communications underlined the policy's broader aim:

It's all about the education and training of the national elite! [...] Decency is one of the fundamental rules of social and public life. It is not up for negotiation. [...] The university is contributing to expand family education through its *Campus Citoyen* [Citizen Campus] programme, one of the aims of which is to help students develop soft skills, particularly in preparing for job interviews. [...] Universities are no longer just about producing graduates! It is now about preparing them for the world of work. [...] Students are being sacked by company directors or heads of department because their dress is deemed inappropriate. [...] For some, dress is so sloppy that it devalues the student's image in society. [...] In the city they're free to dress as they please, but on campus there's a pause. 'There are more important things to do,' some might say. And it's precisely the students' professional integration and future that are urgent, and the dress code is one way of achieving this.⁴⁴

In a related development, whilst the University of Lomé has not adopted a campus-wide dress code, one of its institutes, the Institut des Métiers de la Mer, has taken a more targeted approach. From September 2022, the institute announced restrictions on baggy, tight, or torn trousers, and miniskirts⁴⁵. This move reflects a growing trend among educational institutions to address perceived issues of inappropriate attire, albeit on a more localised scale.

The implementation of dress codes by student unions and university administrations presents an intriguing paradox, reflecting a complex evolution in student activism. While these measures appear conservative, potentially suggesting religious motivations, they also represent a new form of student engagement that diverges from traditional progressive narratives. This shift raises a compelling question: Could the perceived decline in conventional student activism be partially attributed to the success of earlier activists in 'moralising' campus life?

This transformation in student engagement is occurring against a backdrop of broader societal shifts, including the influx of younger students, the pervasive influence of social media, and changing perceptions of volunteerism and leadership. The decline in engagement among both Christian and Muslim student associations mirrors these changes, yet paradoxically, as traditional forms of activism wane, new expressions of student agency have emerged. These developments highlight the evolving nature of student priorities and the complex interplay between religious values, cultural norms, and perceptions of professionalism in academic settings. The changing landscape not only reflects the evolving nature of youth

⁴⁴ 'Tribune: l'Université de Kara officialise...', *24heureinfo*, 25 January 2021.

⁴⁵ 'Université de Lomé: l'I2M interdit...', *24heureinfo*, 22 September 2022.

culture and religious expression in West Africa but also raises important questions about the future role of student organisations in shaping campus life and influencing wider societal discourse.

7.2 Reassessing Student Engagement: A Nuanced Perspective on University Life and Faith-Based Associations

This section challenges simplistic narratives of declining student engagement by examining the insights of past and present members of Christian and Islamic associations. It unveils a spectrum of views from pioneers critically reflecting on their mentoring approaches to current students navigating financial constraints and evolving societal expectations. The landscape of university life has undergone significant transformations. Competition from parish cells and neighbourhood associations has reshaped student involvement in campus activities and activism. Moreover, the expansion of universities, coupled with insufficient on-campus accommodation, has dispersed students across urban areas, complicating the efforts of faith-based associations to convene regular on-campus meetings.

Bridging Generational Perspectives

Several former activists of faith-based student organisations offer a more nuanced assessment of current campus cohorts, cautioning against wholly negative portrayals. The first general secretary of GBEEB emphasises the importance of recognising shifting contexts and mentalities. He warns against hastily judging the new generation's engagement as inferior, suggesting that perceived differences may stem from fundamentally divergent perspectives. This insight underscores the necessity of understanding and valuing contemporary students' views while acknowledging potential generational gaps.⁴⁶ Echoing this balanced stance, a former AEEMT president reflects on the natural inclination of founders to scrutinise their organisation's evolution critically: 'As pioneers, we often look back and feel things haven't progressed as envisioned. Isn't this sometimes a complex? We imagine ourselves superior. [...] However, we must humbly acknowledge that today's young leaders often surpass us in Arabic proficiency and religious practice.'⁴⁷ Similarly, ACEEMUB's first president, despite reservations about the current generation's maturity, recognises

⁴⁶ Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

⁴⁷ Yaya Assadou Kolani and AEEMT leader, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 15 May 2019.

a commendable advancement: today's ACEEMUB activists demonstrate a deeper understanding of Islam and greater Arabic fluency than their predecessors.⁴⁸



Fig. 13: Catholic Chaplaincy of the Université d'Abomey-Calavi et des grandes écoles du Bénin, 16 March 2022, photo by the author.

While criticism of the new generation is prevalent among former activists, some point to shortcomings within the older cohort itself. The outgoing general secretary of GBEEB expresses dismay at the lack of financial backing from 'Friends of GBEEB' – former activists now in the workforce. He laments that many 'cadres who have benefited from the GBU ministry do not give' and 'abandon the ministry', falling into 'the trap of never finishing securing themselves'. These same individuals criticise the youth while 'the GBU, which is almost 50 years old, does not even have a vehicle'. He contends that effective service necessitates financial stability, which is currently absent.⁴⁹ The chaplain of the Université d'Abomey-Calavi et des grandes écoles du Bénin echoes this sentiment, bemoaning the 'abandonment' of respon-

⁴⁸ Ambdel Gannille Inoussa, in conversation with the author, WhatsApp call, 14 March 2022.

⁴⁹ Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

sibility by former Emmaüs participants now in professional or political spheres. He argues these individuals are not doing enough to assist students in securing employment or completing the long-unfinished chapel on the edge of the campus.⁵⁰ This criticism underscores a perceived rift between past and present members, with calls for increased involvement from those who have previously reaped the benefits of these communities.

The challenge of alumni disengagement extends beyond Christian groups to Muslim organisations. A former ACEEMUB member noted the association's aim 'to turn its members into Islamically competent intellectuals who can defend the values of Islam'. However, he observed a trend of activists becoming 'dispersed' as they transition from university to professional life, often neglecting their ACEEMUB engagement.⁵¹ In Togo, the 2019 AEEMT congress resolved to create a board of former activists, aiming to bolster governance with experienced insight and to provide mentorship.⁵² This initiative also seeks to foster cooperation between AEEMT and ACMT, addressing human resource challenges exacerbated by member departures.⁵³

RAJEC Benin has taken proactive steps to address the JEC's waning momentum. Recognising the need for support, RAJEC leaders have committed to reinvigorating youth activism by establishing monitoring committees at each level. However, they acknowledge that daily commitments limit their involvement, despite growing youth disengagement. RAJEC plans workshops to examine JEC activism challenges and assess their own culpability: 'Whatever we say, we can't put all the blame on them. We, the elders, have some responsibility. That's for sure, because activism didn't drop out of the blue. It's just that it went downhill gradually. Maybe we didn't sound the alarm early enough to correct things when they needed correcting.'⁵⁴ Current JEC leaders, being students, often lack financial independence and rely on older members for activity organisation.⁵⁵

Contrastingly, a former JEC-U member in Togo emphasises the importance of allowing the new generation space for independent growth. While occasional assistance is appropriate, he argues that elders should step back to let students experience, challenge, and develop autonomously. He observes that excessive involvement from elders can hinder young people's independence and ability to overcome

50 Ephrem Cyprien Houndje, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 14 March 2022.

51 Mouhamed Ehi-Olou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 22 April 2019.

52 Taofik Bonfoh, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

53 Ibid.

54 Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 11 March 2022.

55 Camille Agbeva and Jean Ezékiel Adigbe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 4 March 2022.

shyness and dependency. Only when given the freedom to take initiative and fully assume responsibility can students develop into societal leaders.⁵⁶

While intergenerational dynamics play a crucial role in shaping student organisations, another pressing issue exists: the financial challenges faced by today's students and the associations that support them. This next section delves into the economic realities that significantly impact student engagement and the sustainability of faith-based groups.

The Challenge of Survival and the Pursuit of Financial Independence

Some elders and current members of faith-based associations offer a nuanced perspective on the challenges confronting today's students, tempering the often bleak assessment held by older generations. The chaplain at the UAC highlights the stark reality: 'Catholic students face the challenge of survival because they are not at all assured of tomorrow.' Students grapple with finding money for food, rent, and tuition, all whilst haunted by 'this tenacious fear that holds them. [...] When I finish, what will become of me?'⁵⁷ The chaplaincy's ability to provide financial assistance is severely limited, with the chaplain himself contributing only modestly from personal resources. This financial precarity is particularly concerning given the competitive environment on campus. The chaplain notes that esoteric groups and Pentecostal sects, which proliferate in the area, 'put money up front to recruit' students 'who have a lot of difficulty making ends meet'.⁵⁸

In Togo, the moderator of the *Paroisse Universitaire Saint-Jean Apôtre* (University Parish of St John the Apostle) has implemented a holistic approach to student support. Recognising the challenges faced by Togolese students, the parish extends its remit beyond spiritual guidance to address material needs. Their assistance ranges from distributing basic foodstuffs to providing paid employment opportunities for students seeking work experience. The parish employs students for up to two years in roles such as garden maintenance, offering a modest income. In 2021, they further bolstered educational support by partially funding masters-level tuition fees for five students. Additionally, the CCU provides temporary accommodation for up to four students from remote areas, allowing them time to secure permanent housing in Lomé.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Modeste Lemon, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 November 2022.

⁵⁷ Ephrem Cyprien Houndje, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 14 March 2022.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Marc Folivi, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 1 September 2021.

GBEEB faces similar financial constraints due to its self-financing model, which deliberately eschews reliance on external aid. This approach, as explained by GBEEB's first general secretary, marks a significant departure from the financial dependency often observed in religious organisations, particularly those with foreign mission ties. He identifies financial dependence as a key challenge for many Beninese churches, which frequently rely on Western partners, raising concerns about their sustainability without such support. A pivotal moment came at a 2002 GBUAF regional meeting, at which the Beninese delegation successfully advocated for the rejection of all external financial support. Their argument centred on the belief that financial independence was not only achievable but also essential for the movement's continued viability and integrity. This bold stance quickly yielded results: by 2003, through effective member-driven financial mobilisation, GBEEB's budget had impressively doubled from four to eight million CFA francs.⁶⁰ However, this steadfast commitment to self-reliance brings its own set of challenges. The former secretary-general acknowledges that GBEEB's limited financial resources may diminish its appeal:

I cannot condemn young people who are not committed, that they are not this, they do not do that [...] A student who is at the university sees his comrade in the *Gayman* system coming to campus in a car or on a motorbike. He says, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and he sleeps hungry. [...] And the GBU is not even able to give him a bag of rice or two kilos of corn. So how can he be recruited? [...] Obviously, the young people are weary of seeing good graces on the other side, but here there is nothing. So how do you expect them to really get involved? It is difficult.⁶¹

This sentiment is echoed by a GBEEB activist reflecting on the challenges faced by Beninese youth:

Today, we, the youth, are primarily focused on securing our livelihood. In Benin, without a means to earn a living, especially for one's independence, one must work diligently. Our parents, who have invested in our education and future, rely on us for support. The pressure to meet their expectations after such investments can be overwhelming. Additionally, there are limited job opportunities for young people in Benin, compelling us to create our own employment. We constantly ponder how to succeed and build a better life, as the cost of living continues to rise.⁶²

⁶⁰ Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author; Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

⁶¹ Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author; Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

⁶² Noé Dekenou, in conversation with the author; Cotonou, 17 March 2022.

A current Bible group leader sheds light on the evolving financial context for students and its impact on group activities. He notes that when GBEEB was founded, most university students received scholarships, fostering a culture of financial solidarity. However, this situation has drastically changed, with most students no longer receiving such support. This shift has strained the group's self-support system, leading to increased dependence on alumni contributions. He emphasises the importance of recognising this altered financial landscape to avoid unfairly criticising students for their reduced financial contributions compared to previous scholarship-supported generations.⁶³

A young former JEC-U leader reflects on the changing nature of student involvement over time. He observes that even five years ago, when he was actively involved in JEC, there was a perception that his generation's engagement fell short of the previous decade's standards. This perception of a continuous shift in engagement appears to be a recurring theme, expected to persist into the future. He emphasises that personal circumstances significantly impact student engagement. For instance, a student working to support themselves will have different priorities and methods of engagement compared to one whose basic needs are met at home.⁶⁴ The parish priest moderator of the university parish in Lomé adds another dimension to the discussion, pointing out that the introduction of the LMD system has reduced students' free time due to different course timetables. Consequently, students often prefer to return home rather than spend their limited free time at the CCU.⁶⁵ This change in academic structure has inadvertently affected students' availability and willingness to engage in extracurricular activities.

While financial constraints and academic pressures significantly impact student engagement, these factors alone do not fully explain the changing landscape of faith-based student associations. The transformation of university environments and the emergence of alternative spaces for religious engagement have further complicated the situation. This shift in the physical and social geography of student life has given rise to a new challenge: competition from parishes and neighbourhood associations.

⁶³ Hake Chabi Assa, Fabrice Hounkpevi and Angelo Klanclounon, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 March 2022.

⁶⁴ Wilfrid Abessan, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 17 November 2022.

⁶⁵ Marc Folivi, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 1 September 2021.

Competition from Parishes and Neighbourhood Associations

The evolving landscape of public universities has become a pivotal factor in the transformation of student activism. This shift is illustrated by the changing face of campus life at the University of Lomé. A former JEC-U activist from the 1990s reminisces about a time when the university provided on-campus housing for nearly all students. The university restaurant, serving as a central hub, offered affordable, quality meals that enabled students to comfortably remain on campus round the clock, thus fostering a vibrant environment for various campus activities.⁶⁶

The geographical expansion of Lomé has further altered the university experience. Another former JEC-U leader recalls that, in the 2000s, ‘Lomé was not from Baguida to Adidogomé’, allowing students to reach campus easily by bicycle or on foot with friends. Today, however, the city’s sprawl has dramatically increased commuting times, complicating the organisation of student meetings.⁶⁷ A similar scenario is unfolding at the University of Abomey-Calavi, where surging enrolment has outpaced the availability of on-campus accommodation. Consequently, many students must seek housing elsewhere in the city, leading to a dispersal that hampers regular attendance at campus meetings and prayer sessions. This geographical fragmentation has significantly impacted the frequency and ease of organising gatherings.⁶⁸

Compounding these challenges is the rising competition from neighbourhood associations and parish or church groups, particularly affecting the JEC in Togo and Benin. Many activists now gravitate towards parish-based JEC groups rather than university-level participation. This shift has prompted concern among former leaders, with one Togolese JEC-U leader lamenting that the ‘JEC has somehow lost its soul’. He argues that the organisation’s primary mission to ‘transform the life environment’ of the *Jécistes* should ideally focus on their educational institutions.⁶⁹ This sentiment reverberates among other elders, who note that JEC-U meetings increasingly occur off-campus, either in the university parish or various city locations, rather than in the traditional CCU on campus.⁷⁰ Furthermore, a former head of the JEC-U in Lomé noted that the continued involvement of university students in school-level JEC cells, while commendable, raises concerns about their potential to overshadow younger members. Their presence may inadvertently lead to

⁶⁶ Sabin Sonhaye, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

⁶⁷ Michel Oni Djagnikpo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 23 August 2021.

⁶⁸ Ephrem Cyprien Houndje, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 14 March 2022.

⁶⁹ Théophile Tonyeme, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 7 September 2021.

⁷⁰ Sabin Sonhaye, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

the imposition of outdated ideas or domination of decision-making processes, as younger students tend to defer to their older counterparts.⁷¹



Fig 14: Centre Saint Jean Lomé (Saint-Jean Apôtre university parish), 1 September 2021, photo by the author.

In the early 2000s, the Bishop of Lomé entrusted the Brothers of St John with overseeing the university chaplaincy, tasking them to develop a pastoral service tailored to the academic environment. This initiative culminated in 2004 with the incorporation of the CCU into the Saint-Jean Apôtre university parish.⁷² The Brothers' ministry now spans two locations: the Centre Saint-Jean, housing the parish church and Jean-Paul II media library, and the CCU on the university campus. The Centre Saint-Jean stands as a multidisciplinary space designed to cater to the university community's educational, cultural, and spiritual needs.⁷³ This facility boasts an array of services, including a library and a cyber centre offering student-friendly

⁷¹ Raymond Sedoufio, in conversation with the author, Google Meet call, 10 November 2022.

⁷² Marc Folivi, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 1 September 2021.

⁷³ 'Mission,' accessed 3 September 2021.

rates. Furthermore, a dedicated study area with Wi-Fi coverage has been established to enhance students' academic pursuits. Despite these impressive amenities, a challenge persists. The priest moderator observes that Sunday mass attendees are predominantly non-university students. This paradox is attributed to the parish's location, which is relatively far from where most students live.⁷⁴

In Benin, the JEC faces similar challenges to its Togolese counterpart. The outgoing JEC president reports that the majority of chapters in Cotonou and Abomey-Calavi are parish-based, with only a small fraction situated in schools. This parish-centric distribution has led to a decline in university-based JEC participation, particularly evident at the University of Abomey-Calavi, although the movement maintains a stronger presence at the University of Parakou. To counter this imbalance, the JEC National Council has devised a strategic action plan aimed at reinvigorating the movement within educational institutions. The current JEC leadership has shifted its focus towards Catholic schools, although the movement is authorised by the Ministry of the Interior to operate in all Beninese schools and universities. However, the implementation of *laïcité* presents varying challenges, with acceptance of religious movements like JEC contingent upon individual school denominational affiliations and directors' interpretations of secular principles.⁷⁵

RAJEC leaders in Benin are grappling with the tension between parish-based and institution-based JEC chapters. While there is a consensus that JEC should ideally maintain a stronger presence in educational institutions, the difficulties in obtaining necessary permissions have forced the movement to expand within parishes to maintain its vitality. Some advocate propose a flexible approach, championing the coexistence of parish and school chapters to broaden the movement's reach. This strategy is bolstered by the general support of parish priests for Catholic action movements like JEC.⁷⁶

The AEEMT faces similar challenges to the JEC, particularly in the form of internal competition stemming from a burgeoning network of neighbourhood youth associations in Lomé. Ironically, many of these local Islamic associations have been established by former AEEMT activists, creating direct competition by organising similar events and activities. This proliferation of Islamic youth groups has led to a saturation of familiar initiatives: seminars, training sessions, sermons, conferences, and round-table discussions. However, the most significant impact has been

⁷⁴ Marc Folivi, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 1 September 2021.

⁷⁵ Camille Agbeva and Jean Ezékiel Adigbe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 4 March 2022.

⁷⁶ Emile Eteka, Elvis Vitoule and Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

felt in the realm of Qur'an recitation competitions during Ramadan, long considered AEEMT's flagship event. A member of the association laments this shift: 'In the past, AEEMT was the only one to do it and there we had all the sponsors, all the people who can contribute financially and materially for the success of the competition. Now, as and when such and such association initiates it, they call upon the same sponsors.'⁷⁷ Despite this intensified competition for resources and attention, the AEEMT continues to hold its annual National Qur'an Recitation Competition. In 2024, this event will celebrate its 28th edition, maintaining its popularity and broad support within Togo's Muslim community.

In sum, whilst some elders bemoan dwindling participation, a more nuanced perspective acknowledges generational shifts, financial pressures, and evolving university environments. Students are grappling with significant economic hurdles, curtailing their ability to fully engage in extracurricular activities. Concurrently, the trend of students living off-campus in the city, coupled with the rise of parish and neighbourhood associations, has reshaped the landscape of student involvement. The focus now shifts to the new challenges facing faith-based associations on campus. The next section explores how stricter enforcement of *laïcité*, competition from endogenous religions, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have transformed the environment. Furthermore, it examines how the struggle for space, particularly at the University of Abomey-Calavi, has forced many groups to adapt their strategies, often relocating activities off-campus or to informal settings.

7.3 Navigating New Challenges: Religious Groups' Adaptation to a Changing University Landscape

Christian groups, especially on the Abomey-Calavi campus, express growing concern over the influence of esoteric movements such as Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism. These movements are perceived to wield considerable power among university authorities, potentially undermining religious life on campus. Simultaneously, a revival of endogenous religions, notably Vodun in Benin, is intensifying the competition by Christian and Muslim groups for recognition and influence. In both Benin and Togo, the Covid-19 pandemic has catalysed a rapid digital transformation within these religious organisations, propelling them towards online platforms for activities and engagement. However, this shift has led to a decline in physical presence post-pandemic. Moreover, the increasingly stringent application of *laïcité* by university authorities, particularly in Benin, presents new obstacles,

⁷⁷ Taofik Bonfoh, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

notably restricting access to campus facilities for religious gatherings. The struggle for space, exemplified by the difficulty in securing classrooms for activities, underscores the disparities in the treatment of religious groups within these academic environments. This challenge is particularly acute at the University of Abomey-Calavi, where many organisations have been compelled to relocate their activities off-campus or to informal settings.

Freemasonry and the Competition from the Endogenous Religions

In Benin, and to a lesser extent in Togo, some Catholics and evangelicals perceive that esoteric movements, particularly the Rosicrucians and Freemasons, have gained substantial influence on university campuses, including within the administrative echelons at the University of Abomey-Calavi. This perceived influence is thought to foster an increasingly hostile attitude towards religious groups on campus. This is the case of the campus chaplain⁷⁸ and former GBEEB leader, who assert ‘We know that most of the leaders who are now running our country are Freemasons. And Freemasonry and Christianity do not go together.’⁷⁹ In Togo, a former *Jéciste*, now a professor at the University of Lomé, recounted his personal experience of refusing to join Freemasonry, claiming the decision had impeded his career advancement.⁸⁰ While the precise nature and extent of Freemasonry’s influence remain elusive, these beliefs frequently surface in discussions, shaping the narrative of religious life on campus.

In Benin and Togo, as across the African continent,⁸¹ Freemasonry evokes a mix of fascination, apprehension, and speculation. Its members are often perceived as wielding considerable influence in business and political spheres. High-profile figures, including former President Boni Yayi and President Faure Gnassingbé, have faced persistent rumours about their Masonic affiliations, allegations both have denied. The significance of Freemasonry in Benin was further underscored by Benoit Kouassi, who served as grand master of the country’s Grand Lodge and Executive Secretary of African Freemasonry from July 2019 until his death in April 2020.⁸² Historically, the relationship between the Catholic Church in Benin and Freemasonry has been fraught with tension. The resignation of Archbishop Marcel

⁷⁸ Ephrem Cyprien Houndje, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 14 March 2022.

⁷⁹ Jacob Djossou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 19 March 2022.

⁸⁰ Pierre Radji, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 30 August 2021.

⁸¹ Akindès and Miran-Guyon 2017.

⁸² ‘Franc-maçonnerie en Afrique...’ *Jeune Afrique*, 26 July 2019.

Agboton of Cotonou in 2010 was purportedly linked to his Masonic membership. Similarly, in 2017, a parish in Cotonou refused to celebrate a requiem mass for José Dominique Loko, Côte d'Ivoire's honorary consul in Benin and acting grand master of the Grand Masonic Lodge of Benin since 2016, citing his Masonic ties.⁸³ These episodes illuminate the underlying tensions and mistrust permeating the Beninese Christian community towards Freemasonry, highlighting how perceptions of this movement influence the religious and social landscape in Benin.

While Freemasonry presents one set of challenges, the resurgence of endogenous religions adds another layer of complexity to the religious landscape on campus. At the University of Abomey-Calavi, the increasing visibility of endogenous religions (*religions endogènes*), particularly Vodun, among both students and professors, has become a growing concern for evangelical groups. A former GBEEB official emphasised that Vodun, unlike other religious practices, often enjoys a degree of exemption from *laïcité* due to its deep cultural roots.⁸⁴ This unique position contributes to Vodun's renewed strength and visibility on campus. In this context, the role of Professor Dodji Amouzouvi, Pontiff of the God Sakpata and head of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Abomey-Calavi, is particularly noteworthy. As a prominent advocate of Vodun, Amouzouvi founded the *Laboratoire d'Analyse et de Recherche Religions, Espaces et Développement* (Laboratory for Analysis and Research on Religions, Spaces and Development, LARRED) in 2014.⁸⁵ LARRED has since played an instrumental role in producing research on Vodun and advocating for the recognition of endogenous religions.

In March 2017, LARRED organised a symposium on *laïcité* in Benin, championing the recognition of endogenous religions. Despite secularism being enshrined in the constitution, Amouzouvi critiqued the erosion of this principle, arguing that it often falls victim to biased interpretations and social injustice towards endogenous religions.⁸⁶ More recently, LARRED's ballets, made up of students and doctoral candidates, presented the show '*Cordon Ombilical*' (Umbilical Cord) in Cotonou in August 2022. This performance aimed to reconnect the Beninese people with African traditions by dramatising, through song and dance, the results of research into various Vodun deities.⁸⁷ Amouzouvi aligns this theme with President Talon's vision of promoting Beninese culture, stating, 'We are following in the footsteps

83 Sarr, 'L'Église béninoise refuse...', *La Croix Africa*, 20 November 2017.

84 Jacob Djossou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 19 March 2022.

85 Gbeto, 'Commémoration des 5 ans du Larred...', *L'Événement Précis*, 10 April 2019.

86 Doltaire, 'Symposium sur la laïcité...', *Nord Sud Quotidien*, 28 March 2017.

87 Yaï, 'Entretien avec le professeur Dodji...', *Fraternité*, 5 August 2022.

of the President of the Republic, who is making culture a structuring pillar of our development, our revelation and Africa's influence on the roof of the world.'⁸⁸

In recent years, President Talon, despite his Catholic background, has made the promotion of Vodun a cornerstone of his administration's cultural agenda. This shift is exemplified by the transformation of the annual 10 January celebration into a two-day event, the Vodun Days, held in Ouidah.⁸⁹ The government also established the Vodun Rites Committee (*'Comité des rites Vodun'*) in September 2023. This committee, tasked with promoting religious tourism centred on Vodun practices, is headed by Mahougnon Kakpo, a professor of African literature at the UAC, with Dodji Amouzouvi as a member.⁹⁰ The formation of this committee marked a significant step towards officially recognising and promoting Vodun as a vital part of Benin's cultural heritage.

In November 2023, the Minister for Tourism, Culture and the Arts presented the Vodun Days as a key component of the ambitious 'Benin Revealed' (*'Bénin Révélé'*) programme. This initiative aims to showcase Benin's cultural distinctiveness and stimulate tourism. The Vodun Days are part of a broader strategy to valorise Vodun heritage, which includes the creation of the International Vodun Museum in Porto-Novo and the Vodun Monasteries Route (*'Route des couvents Vodun'*). Notably, the Minister emphasised that while adhering to the principle of *laïcité*, the state actively supports diverse religious events and the preservation and authentic representation of heritage to strengthen social cohesion. Through these efforts, Benin aims to leverage its cultural and religious wealth to promote tourism and enhance its global cultural contribution.⁹¹

The government's commitment to promoting Vodun culture was further underscored during the Vodun Days celebrations, where President Talon himself was present. In a media interview, he articulated the rationale behind this cultural shift:

Unfortunately, the spread of the religions of the book, especially Christianity and Islam, has cast the religion of Vodun in such a negative light that Africans have abandoned what is part of their own identity, history, and heritage in favour of imported religions [...]. But we have also somewhat abandoned, or even begun to be ashamed of, this beautiful philosophy that is the African philosophy of the relationship between God and man. And Vodun is sometimes practised in secret, or people are ashamed of it. And many of our Christian and Muslim compatriots have this double religious practice. In broad daylight, what comes from the imported

⁸⁸ Akéké, 'Cordon ombilical: le Larred...', *Banouto*, 10 August 2022.

⁸⁹ 'La cité historique de Ouidah accueille les Vodun Days, les 9 et 10 janvier 2024,' accessed 13 November 2023.

⁹⁰ Agbon, 'Tourisme religieux autour du Vodun...', *Bénin Intelligent*, 19 October 2023.

⁹¹ 'Initiative des Vodun Days: le Ministre ABIMBOLA dévoile le contexte et le contenu alléchant des festivités,' accessed 18 January 2024.

religion and, more discreetly, what belongs to our real identity. We said that it would be good for Benin's influence, for development, for everything, if we could get back to our own identity. [...] And we also want to take this opportunity to deconstruct everything that has been wrongly portrayed in a negative way, everything that has been said about the Vodun religion, claiming that this religion is the emanation of evil and the like. [...] Besides, Benin is secular, the state is secular, and we have not promoted one spirituality against another. That's why we are presenting more of the cultural, artistic and identity aspects of Vodun, without promoting Vodun spirituality.⁹²

As mentioned above, Soglo's establishment of the annual endogenous religions celebration and the Ouidah 92 festival faced significant opposition from the Catholic Church, which argued that such state promotion of Vodun undermined the principle of *laïcité*.⁹³ The Vodun festival has since drawn criticism, particularly from evangelical Christian groups who often view Vodun as satanic. President Boni Yayi notably abstained from participating in official celebrations. In 2016, evangelical pastor John Migan petitioned the Constitutional Court to abolish the holiday and remove the phrase 'spirits of the ancestors' (*mânes des ancêtres*) from the presidential oath, citing *laïcité* concerns. However, his request was rejected.⁹⁴ Consequently, some in Benin perceive the Vodun Days event as a violation of *laïcité*, exacerbating the frustration of Vodun proponents who argue that *laïcité* has been applied inconsistently, often to Vodun's detriment.⁹⁵ Despite this, the Vodun Rites Committee chairman maintains that Vodun merits recognition as a legitimate religion.⁹⁶

Christian and Islamic student associations face an additional challenge in the emergence of the pan-Africanist Kemite (or Kamit) movement. Advocating a return to African values and roots, these intellectuals are 'vehemently opposed to both Christianity and Islam because they say that African religion has been sidelined and demonised', as one GBEEB pioneer noted.⁹⁷ This stance complicates evangelisation efforts by organisations like GBEEB on university campuses. Through various awareness-raising activities, Kemite groups challenge established religious narratives and promote an alternative perspective emphasising the value of indigenous African religious and cultural traditions. Such initiatives are likely to resonate with

92 Ahougnon, 'Entretien avec Patrice Talon: 'On a même commencé à avoir un peu honte de cette belle philosophie africaine,' accessed 13 January 2024.

93 Tall 1995, 200–01.

94 'Recours au sujet de la célébration...', *L'Événement Précis*, 20 February 2017.

95 Agbon, 'Bénin, une laïcité de trompe-l'œil?', *Bénin Intelligent*, 26 January 2024.

96 Agbon, 'Au Bénin, la première religion...', *Bénin Intelligent*, 9 January 2024.

97 Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

students and professors seeking to reconnect with their African heritage. As the former Secretary General of GBEEB observes:

The Gospel has encountered traditional respondents from endogenous cults on its path, making faith discussions with students on campus challenging. [...] They often argue, 'No, that's for White people. The Gospel is for White people. Our parents never practised this, so why are you here? You are the emissaries of white missionaries. [...] This is not going to lead us anywhere.'⁹⁸

Faith-based student associations faced an entirely different set of challenges with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. The global health crisis not only disrupted traditional forms of engagement but also catalysed a significant shift in how these organisations operate. The pandemic compelled a swift transition to digital platforms, fundamentally reshaping religious activities and student involvement.

Covid-19 and the Digital Turn in Faith-Based Student Associations

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on social, political, and economic spheres, and Africa's university campuses were no exception.⁹⁹ Faith-based and student organisations acutely felt the repercussions. In Niger, for example, the closure of Abdou Moumouni University's campus mosque as part of preventive measures sparked vehement reactions from Muslim students.¹⁰⁰ Likewise, student organisations in Benin and Togo grappled with various restrictions. Benin imposed a '*cordon sanitaire*' for several months, severely limiting travel between communes. The closure of bars, places of worship, and entertainment venues, coupled with restrictions on gatherings exceeding 50 people, severely hampered normal activities. RAJEC leaders observed a decline in student engagement during this period, particularly among less involved members, with many having lost interest upon resumption of activities.¹⁰¹ In Togo, most organisations, including AEEMT, suspended their primary activities due to the closure of educational institutions and a ban on gatherings of more than 15 people. Major events such as the National Islamic Training Seminar and the National Holy Qur'an Recitation Competition

⁹⁸ Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

⁹⁹ Arndt, Yacouba, Lawanson, Msindo and Simatei 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Bello Adamou and Oumarou 2023.

¹⁰¹ Emile Eteka, Elvis Vitoule and Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

were cancelled in 2020, with the 2021 edition occurring at a much-reduced scale.¹⁰² The current Amir of AEEMT reflected on the nearly two-year hiatus in major activities, noting a 'loosening up at the grassroots level.'¹⁰³

The Covid-19 pandemic catalysed a transformative shift in how religious associations across faiths utilised digital technology. As previously discussed, many current and former activists have voiced concerns about social media's negative influence, citing the sway of influencers, the rise of cybercrime, and a perceived erosion of religious values. Notwithstanding these concerns, social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for mobilisation, organisation, and community building. During the pandemic, numerous faith-based student groups adeptly leveraged these platforms to extend their reach, coordinate activities, and maintain member connections. This swift adaptation led to a 'deterritorialisation' of religious activities, transitioning them from physical to virtual spaces. Using platforms such as Zoom for meetings, webinars for fraternal exchanges and prayers, Facebook for live broadcasts, and WhatsApp for discussion groups, these organisations not only maintained but often expanded their engagement despite physical distancing measures. A prime example of this digital pivot is the AEEMT's initiative to stream Friday sermons from both the campus mosque and other mosques in Lomé on its YouTube channel, which has over 5,500 subscribers,¹⁰⁴ and on their TikTok page, which has 4,000 followers.¹⁰⁵

Similarly, in 2022, GBUST initiated '*Un Nouveau Regard*' (A New Look), a series of video capsules on Facebook, responding to the increasing prevalence of social media among youth and the lingering constraints on face-to-face interactions.¹⁰⁶ This online series, produced and hosted by Bible Group students at the University of Lomé, offers biblically informed perspectives on current global affairs. By addressing topics such as love, gender, development, and freedom, *Un Nouveau Regard* encourages students to view contemporary issues through a fresh, scriptural lens. GBUST and AEEMT's digital strategies have proven crucial in maintaining community links, underscoring religious groups' resilience and adaptability amidst pandemic challenges.

However, the shift to digital technology, while beneficial during lockdowns, has subsequently impacted physical participation in faith-based student associations. This impact is reflected in membership numbers and engagement patterns

¹⁰² AEEMT, 'Journal du congrès - N° 2,' uploaded 1 January 2022.

¹⁰³ Aziz Gountante, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 5 August 2021.

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/c/aeemtofficel>.

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.tiktok.com/@aeemtofficel>.

¹⁰⁶ For example, see 'NOUVEAU REGARD N°16,' uploaded 20 March 2023.

across various groups. Pre-pandemic, GBUST reported 1,800 members nationwide, including 500–600 university students.¹⁰⁷ In 2020, GBEEB recorded 1,592 pupils and 441 university students actively engaged nationwide.¹⁰⁸ The University of Lomé boasted approximately ten JEC sections per faculty, each averaging 10–20 activists.¹⁰⁹ Whilst current precise figures are unavailable, these associations anticipate a decline in activist numbers. A RAJEC-Benin member observed that reliance on digital communication had ‘motivated the laziness of some people’ and diminished attendance at face-to-face meetings.¹¹⁰ Reflecting on the past decade’s changes, a former JEC-U leader in Lomé highlighted a stark contrast in communication and engagement. A decade ago, the absence of smartphones necessitated more face-to-face interactions for collaborative activities. In contrast, today’s students gravitate towards virtual engagement, such as WhatsApp messaging, leading to decreased physical group participation.¹¹¹

This digital transformation has undoubtedly reshaped the landscape of faith-based student associations. While it has enabled continued connection during challenging times, it has also altered the nature of community engagement, presenting both opportunities and challenges for these organisations moving forward. Beyond the challenges posed by technological shifts, these faith-based student groups face another significant hurdle: a stricter interpretation and application of *laïcité* on university campuses.

A Stricter Application of *Laïcité* on Campus?

Recent years have witnessed a marked change in university authorities’ attitudes towards religious groups, particularly regarding access to campus facilities for activities. This change is especially pronounced in Benin, where activists from various faith-based associations reminisce about the 1990s and 2000s, when securing lecture halls or classrooms for events was considerably easier. A former ACEEMUB activist, now a professor at the University of Abomey-Calavi, experienced this transformation first-hand. Upon his return, he anticipated finding the multi-purpose hall that had once been a hub for cultural, sporting, and religious

¹⁰⁷ Armand Dzadu, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 12 August 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Hake Chabi Assa, Fabrice Hounkpevi and Angelo Klanclounon, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 March 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Wilfrid Abessan, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 17 November 2022.

¹¹⁰ Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.

¹¹¹ Wilfrid Abessan, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 17 November 2022.

activities in the 1990s. To his dismay, he discovered the facility no longer existed on campus. Instead, he was informed of the presence of mosques in the vicinity of the university.¹¹²

The general secretary of GBEEB from 2009 to 2021 highlighted an incident in 2017 that exemplified this shift. When GBEEB requested permission to use the university's pitch for football matches during a cultural week, the COUS director rejected the application, citing the university's secular nature as grounds for denying space to religious groups. Even after appealing to Vice-Rector Maxime da Cruz, the request was denied. Da Cruz argued that the group's name, '*Groupe biblique universitaire*', conflicted with the university's commitment to *laïcité*. This incident, according to the GBEEB leader, reflects a broader national trend towards reinforcing *laïcité* in the public sphere.¹¹³ For instance, in January 2017, in an effort to clean up public spaces in Cotonou, the Beninese government prohibited their use for religious events in the name of *laïcité*.¹¹⁴ More recently, in 2022, the government introduced noise pollution measures, including regulations for places of worship. President Talon engaged with Muslim and Christian leaders to discuss new rules governing church bells, amplifiers, and muezzin calls, with non-compliance penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment.¹¹⁵ These developments have significantly impacted campus activities, making it increasingly challenging for religious groups to secure venues for conferences or Bible studies.¹¹⁶

Catholic students at the University of Abomey-Calavi grapple with unique challenges amidst a stricter interpretation of *laïcité*. While they benefit from access to off-campus facilities like the chapel and Saint Dominique monastery in Cotonou, their on-campus situation has become increasingly precarious. The implementation of *laïcité* varies with each rectorate, each rector harbouring distinct concerns. Some fear that permitting the JEC to use classrooms might set a precedent, inviting similar requests from other religious groups. Historically, Catholic students occasionally secured classrooms through personal connections with Catholic university authorities or deans. More frequently, however, they congregate in less formal spaces: campus courtyards, beneath trees, on grassy areas, or in makeshift venues like the straw huts (*paillottes*) of the *École Polytechnique d'Abomey-Calavi* (EPAC)¹¹⁷ or the university restaurant. The off-campus university chapel, while

112 Abou-Bakari Imorou, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 14 March 2022.

113 Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

114 Madore 2022a, 10–11.

115 Domingo, 'Lutte contre la pollution sonore...', *Le Béninois Libéré*, 17 February 2023; 'Patrice Talon rencontre les responsables...', *Les Pharaons*, 17 February 2023.

116 Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

117 Located on the campus of Abomey-Calavi.

available, poses accessibility challenges.¹¹⁸ The UAC campus chaplain shared a telling incident. Despite obtaining permission from the *École Nationale d'Économie Appliquée et de Management* (National School of Applied Economics and Management, ENEAM) director for Catholic meetings, his assistant, clad in a Dominican habit, was denied entry due to the religious attire. The chaplain perceives Catholics as being particularly targeted, facing the most significant obstacles on campus. He attributes this to a perceived notion among authorities that 'Catholics are too powerful' and need to be 'broken'.¹¹⁹

Various religious groups at UAC perceive an imbalance in the application of *laïcité*, particularly between Christians and Muslims. Over the past decade, Beninese Muslims have increasingly voiced concerns about religious discrimination and perceived state favouritism towards Christianity. This issue came to the fore in 2014 during a working session titled 'Islam and the practice of *laïcité* in Benin', at which Muslim representatives advocated for more equitable treatment of religions by the state.¹²⁰ These concerns were further exacerbated in November 2022 when the *École Nationale d'Administration et de Magistrature* (National School of Administration and Magistracy, ENAM) and several educational institutions banned headscarves.¹²¹

Conversely, some Christians at UAC argue that Muslims enjoy privileged access to worship spaces, citing the 'Gaddafi' amphitheatre in the ILACI building. However, this perspective overlooks the challenges faced by Muslim students, exemplified by the recent renovation of the ACEEMUB mosque on the campus outskirts. During the renovation, which took place between 2018 and 2022,¹²² Muslim students were compelled to attend other nearby mosques for Friday prayers. In 2018, ACEEMUB officials were forced to close the Umar Ibn Khattab Mosque due to structural deterioration.¹²³ The new mosque, funded by NGO OHEI-Bénin and Saudi donors, now includes a conference room.¹²⁴

118 Emile Eteka, Elvis Vitoule and Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

119 Ephrem Cyprien Houndje, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 14 March 2022.

120 'Procès verbal de réunion du comité mixte gouvernement-communauté musulmane d'organisation du séminaire bilan sur 'l'islam et la pratique de la laïcité au Bénin,' 2014, accessed 27 June 2024.

121 Igue, 'Port de voile en Islam...,' *Fraternité*, 30 November 2022.

122 Moko, 'La mosquée Oumar,' accessed 27 June 2024.

123 Tomoussossi and Ogbon, 'Fermeture de la mosquée des étudiants...,' *ASSALAM*, January 2019, 4.

124 Oyèyèmi, 'Construction du nouveau siège de l'ACEEMUB: après un an d'attente, la délégation saoudienne se dit prête,' accessed 27 June 2024; Oyèyèmi 2019; 'Construction de la mosquée Oumar bin Khattob (siège de l'Acemub),' accessed 27 June 2024.



Fig. 15: ACEEMUB Mosque under construction, 16 March 2022, photo by the author.

The University of Lomé presents a contrasting scenario to the Université d'Abomey-Calavi, with on-campus places of worship significantly facilitating activities for groups like JEC and AEEMT. A former JEC-U leader, reflecting on his 2017–19 tenure, noted a generally positive relationship with university authorities. JEC-U's consistent access to the CCU for activities was a notable advantage. Their official recognition meant that organising events usually required only a simple letter to the university. Many university officials, familiar with JEC-U and attending the university parish church, contributed to this amicable relationship. However, a policy shift in his second year saw the university cease allocating classrooms and amphitheatres to any association, religious or otherwise.¹²⁵ According to the University Parish moderator, there are plans to modernise the CCU on campus to make it more attractive to students. He noted that the CCU's prominence has diminished in light of the recent modernisation of the campus. Previously, when the campus was less developed, the CCU stood out, but has since lost its relative attractiveness. The CCU's modernisation faces funding challenges and bureaucratic hurdles, as the site, on

¹²⁵ Raymond Sedoufio, in conversation with the author, Google Meet call, 10 November 2022.

loan from the university, lacks official documentation, necessitating permits for any renovation work.¹²⁶

While the presence of the CCU and mosque at UL benefits their respective groups, it has sparked discontent among other religious organisations seeking their own designated spaces. The Adventist Student Youth of Togo (JEAT), for instance, has struggled to secure a worship space despite submitting formal requests and building plans. Initially using a building near Cité B, JEAT was displaced by renovations, resorting to outdoor meetings. Their attempts to establish a campus church were thwarted by unexpected land purchase requirements, financial constraints, and leadership changes at the university.¹²⁷

GBUST leaders face similar challenges. The current secretary general contrasts the ease of organising large events in the 2000s with the present difficulties. Previously, GBUST could host gatherings of 200–300 people in lecture halls, particularly during lunch hours. Now, tighter schedules and classroom shortages have made securing such spaces increasingly challenging, even when offering payment.¹²⁸ GBUST's January 2013 activity report at the University of Lomé highlighted growing challenges in securing meeting spaces over the preceding two years. A major obstacle was the rescheduling of available amphitheatres, severely limiting the organisation of large group gatherings. The situation was exacerbated by the announced renovation of South Campus residences, resulting in the loss of access to the Protestant Chaplaincy's meeting room – a modest space that had accommodated up to 60 people. These constraints compelled the association to adapt, shifting its focus towards cultivating smaller, localised cells within various faculties.¹²⁹

By 2018, the Bible Group president at UL noted a marked decrease in the university's receptiveness to GBUST. This shift led to a fragmented experience for members, dispersed across different cells without a central meeting place. Improvised venues became the norm, with students resorting to stone blocks or sitting on cloth-covered floors. This lack of a dedicated space has significantly impacted member cohesion and familiarity. To counter these challenges, GBUST initiated fundraising efforts to acquire land near the university to establish a GBU house as a central meeting point that would enhance the group's capacity to reach and influence a broader student population.¹³⁰ In response to the university's restrictions on large lecture hall gatherings, GBUST has pivoted its strategy. The focus has shifted

126 Marc Folivi, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 1 September 2021.

127 Valdo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

128 Armand Dzadu, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 12 August 2021.

129 'Le Nouveau Repère,' January 2013, accessed 27 June 2024.

130 Ezian-Gnamavo, 'Poussé vers la sortie mais encore plus présent,' accessed 10 August 2022.

to smaller cells of five or six students convening on campus benches for Bible study. This approach aligns with GBUST's adaptive philosophy: 'We cannot refuse six students who have a student card to sit on a bench and discuss.'¹³¹ Larger activities, such as monthly general meetings, are now conducted off-campus.



Fig. 16: Benches near the Library at the University of Lomé, 13 September 2021, photo by the author.

The GBUST leader attributes these challenges to what he terms a 'misinterpreted *laïcité*'. He contends that rather than fostering 'diversity', it is 'interpreted as the exclusion of all that is religious'. Despite GBUST's official recognition, he perceives mere tolerance from university authorities: 'They don't make life easy for you because they have the image that you are bringing the church into the university.' He frames this as a distinctly 'francophone problem', drawing a stark contrast with universities in Ghana and Nigeria, where Christian groups enjoy dedicated chaplains and on-campus chapels. This disparity is particularly galling for GBUST members, given that Catholics and Muslims maintain their places of worship on campus. The GBUST leader posits that these groups' influence has secured their

131 Armand Dzadu, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 12 August 2021.

worship spaces: ‘It’s because Catholics and Muslims are so influential that they have managed to have a place of worship.’¹³²

The GBEEB on the Abomey-Calavi campus faces similar hurdles. Current challenges stem from tightly scheduled classes and limited room availability, with classrooms frequently at capacity. This leaves scant space for extracurricular activities like those offered by GBEEB. Their requests for space are sometimes met with resistance, justified on the grounds of upholding *laïcité*.¹³³ Consequently, they have resorted to informal gatherings, often convening under trees on campus. The students, dedicated to their Bible studies and activities, have shown resourcefulness by using bricks to create makeshift seating and adapting to open spaces for their meetings.



Fig. 17: Jardin U (University of Abomey-Calavi), 5 March 2022, photo by the author.

¹³² Armand Dzadu, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 12 August 2021.

¹³³ Hake Chabi Assa, Fabrice Hounkpevi and Angelo Klanclounon, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 March 2022.

The increasingly restrictive stance of university authorities in Abomey-Calavi has compelled faith-based student associations to relocate their activities off-campus. Since 2004, GBEEB has operated from its national headquarters in Agblangandan, Sèmè-Kpodji commune, more than 20 km from the Abomey-Calavi campus.¹³⁴ This geographical shift has prompted GBEEB leaders to consider establishing reading and meeting centres in various towns across the country, beyond the confines of educational institutions, where conducting activities has become challenging. These proposed centres are envisioned as multifunctional spaces addressing broader social needs. By providing essential resources such as computers and internet access, they aim to support students lacking such facilities. The plan involves constructing these centres either on or near campuses, offering students a conducive environment for their activities. GBEEB leaders emphasise the urgency of this initiative, citing the currently inadequate conditions, in which students often resort to studying the Bible under trees.¹³⁵

Both GBUST and GBEEB have adopted strategic approaches to enhance their influence within the university community. GBUST explicitly aims to 'impact the university' by encouraging alumni with professorial or administrative positions to exert influence. This strategy bore fruit in 2021 when a GBUST member secured a position in the Presidency of the University of Lomé.¹³⁶ GBEEB has pursued a similar path. The former general secretary sought to unify Protestant professors at the University of Abomey-Calavi to counter the perceived marginalisation of Christians and address the administration's reluctance to meet their needs. This initiative yielded tangible results, with one professor offering his laboratory for GBEEB activities and others providing their offices for strategic meetings.¹³⁷ Furthermore, GBEEB has attempted to extend its influence to student unions. This candid reflection reveals both the successes and challenges of GBEEB's efforts to shape student politics:

What we have managed to do is to try and get some of our students into union offices. [...] When we have elections, we encourage students who are brilliant to get on the lists. So when they get elected, we call them and advise them on the position they should take. So sometimes they follow us. Sometimes they don't. [laughs] So we managed to do that for a few years, but

¹³⁴ Jacob Djossou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 19 March 2022.

¹³⁵ Hake Chabi Assa, Fabrice Hounkpevi and Angelo Klanclounon, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 March 2022.

¹³⁶ Armand Dzađu, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 12 August 2021.

¹³⁷ Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

now it's become high politics. So it's hard to get our students on the electoral lists [...] You can't control them anymore.¹³⁸

The narratives of decline presented by former activists, while reflecting real changes in student engagement, fail to fully capture the complex dynamics at play. Rather than a simple decline, we observe a transformation of faith-based student activism in response to a changing societal and academic landscape. Factors such as stricter enforcement of *laïcité*, financial constraints, evolving student demographics, and the digital revolution have reshaped how students engage with religious organisations and express their faith on campus. While traditional forms of participation have decreased, new modes of engagement have emerged, particularly in digital spaces. This perceived decline may partly reflect the natural evolution of these movements as they mature and adapt to new realities. Crucially, while organised religion on campus may be experiencing a downturn, the importance of faith remains high for many Christian and Muslim students. Religious identity often transcends organised structures, manifesting in personal, individual forms not immediately visible in organised contexts. An increasing focus on individualism, fuelled by neoliberal ideology, has also contributed to this transformation. This evolution reflects wider socio-political changes and signals a need to reassess the influence of faith-based student groups. It is therefore more accurate to speak of a reconfiguration of faith-based student activism rather than an outright decline. As these organisations navigate this new terrain, they must redefine their relevance by embracing and adapting to these new realities.

138 Ibid.

Conclusion: A History of Resilience, Adaptation, and Community

This book unveils the journey of Christian and Muslim student associations in Benin and Togo, demonstrating how they have not merely endured but flourished in the face of authoritarian regimes, *laïcité*, and socio-economic upheaval. These faith-based groups have profoundly reshaped student activism and redefined religion's role at public universities since their emergence at the University of Abomey-Calavi and the University of Lomé in the 1970s. Their growth, amidst environments initially dominated by secular, anti-imperialist, and pan-Africanist ideologies, speaks to their resilience and adaptability. Central to their success are the innovative 'social curricula' they have developed, integrating academic knowledge with spiritual and moral growth. This holistic approach has become increasingly vital in an era marked by massification and graduate unemployment, offering students not only practical preparation for post-university challenges but also a framework for conceptualising and pursuing the good life in contemporary African societies. By providing alternative pathways to fulfilment and success, these associations help students reconcile global aspirations with local realities. This comprehensive model challenges the secular intellectual traditions of these universities, deeply rooted in Western academic paradigms, and necessitates a re-evaluation of religious expression within the context of *laïcité* and religious pluralism.

By examining both Christian and Muslim student associations over five decades, this book has offered a novel perspective on the interplay between religion, politics, and education in West Africa. The parallel developments in Benin and Togo provide a compelling comparative case study, shedding light on how faith-based student associations navigate the matrix of religion, culture, and politics within academic environments. This approach not only enhances our understanding of religion's role in public universities but also highlights the importance of translocal factors in shaping group dynamics and the changing function of universities amidst increasing enrolments and rising graduate unemployment.

Higher education in Benin and Togo emerged in the 1960s with the creation of the *Institut d'Enseignement Supérieur du Bénin*, symbolising colonial emancipation and nation-building. The establishment of national universities in 1970 marked an important step towards independence. However, the early years of the University of Abomey-Calavi and the University of Lomé were characterised by political turmoil and authoritarian rule. Both Kérékou's regime in Benin and Eyadéma's in Togo imposed strict controls on religious practices and sought to channel student associations into unified party structures. While Eyadéma successfully suppressed

protests at the UL, the UAC became a focal point of resistance to Kérékou's authoritarianism.

During this period, faith-based student groups demonstrated remarkable adaptability in navigating these authoritarian landscapes. Unlike state-aligned student unions, Christian and Muslim associations carved out a unique activist path, advocating for moral autonomy and addressing educational challenges. They served as vital intermediaries between students, administrators, and the state, balancing civic engagement with political neutrality. These groups transformed into spiritual refuges and platforms for resilience, offering practical support and alternative visions of the good life that transcended the material constraints and political pressures of their time. The construction of places of worship on the Lomé campus, with the backing of national religious figures, exemplified their ability to foster positive university relations. Notably, leaders of these associations maintained an apolitical stance, crucial for navigating the complex educational and political landscape of the time.

Recent jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel and attacks in northern Benin and Togo have heightened security concerns in the Gulf of Guinea region. This has led to increased surveillance of Muslim communities, affecting religious coexistence and political freedoms.¹ Muslim student organisations, such as the *Association des Élèves et Étudiants Musulmans au Togo* (AEEMT), have faced scrutiny,² while institutions like the *Institut de Langue Arabe et de la Culture Islamique* (ILACI) at UAC have encountered financial difficulties³ and suspicions of extremist links.⁴ In response to these challenges, Christian and Islamic student associations at both universities have increasingly collaborated to address issues of violent extremism. The *Jeunesse Étudiante Catholique* (JEC) and AEEMT have organised seminars and workshops on these topics,⁵ demonstrating a commitment to interfaith cooperation in tackling societal problems. This proactive approach extends to initiatives like ACEEMUB's focus on cybercrime and terrorism, reflecting a shared belief in youth engagement for social development.⁶

1 Madore 2022b.

2 Ikilil Adjama, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 17 August 2021.

3 Badarou, 'Conséquences de la crise libyenne...', *Matin Libre*, 22 October 2019; Lidehou, 'Université Abomey-Calavi: Direct-Aid Bénin fait don de matériels et équipements didactiques,' accessed 14 March 2023.

4 Abou-Bakari Imorou, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 14 March 2022.

5 Ayetan, 'Togo: des activités socio-éducatives...', *La Croix Africa*, 29 July 2022; 'Extrémisme violent et Cybersécurité au Togo,' accessed 27 June 2024; 'Lutte contre l'extrémisme violent...', *ATOP*, 7 August 2023.

6 '11e congrès ordinaire de l'ACEEMUB...', *Matin Libre*, 21 July 2023.

Importantly, this book's findings contrast with the recent, dominant focus on religious radicalism. They highlight the largely peaceful coexistence of faith communities on university campuses, characterised by mutual influence rather than conflict or aggressive proselytising. The principle of *laïcité*, while central to managing religious dynamics and widely supported by students, faces challenges in its application, particularly in ensuring equitable treatment of different religious groups. The implementation of *laïcité* varies significantly between the UAC and the UL, reflecting broader challenges in balancing religious freedom with secular academic principles. At UAC, a strict policy prohibits allocating space to religious groups, inadvertently highlighting inequalities and sparking debates about the nature of *laïcité*. In contrast, UL initially adopted a more inclusive approach, providing designated worship spaces for Catholics and Muslims. However, recent resource constraints have led to restrictions, forcing religious groups to seek alternative meeting places. This situation reflects a broader reassessment of university spaces as sites of both secular and religious interaction. The renewed visibility of endogenous religions, such as Vodun in Benin, alongside state promotion, further complicates adherence to secular principles. This shift raises questions about the role of universities in decolonisation and Africanisation of education, potentially moving towards more culturally integrated identities.

The dynamics of majority versus minority religious status add another layer of complexity. Muslim student associations, while typically less politically scrutinised than the Catholic Church, face unique challenges in the context of recent regional jihadist threats. Their efforts to counter prejudice and create an environment in which Islamic identity and secular academic values coexist underscore the ongoing negotiation between religious identity and secularism. This situation underlines the need for a fair implementation of *laïcité* that recognises and supports the diverse religious communities within these academic settings.

The university campuses in Benin and Togo serve as microcosms reflecting broader national, religious, and societal trends. The political liberalisation and expanded religious freedoms of the 1990s heightened the visibility and influence of faith in public life, marking a transformative era that extended to campus religiosity. These universities not only mirror societal changes but also actively shape them, influencing schools and colleges as students strategically train future activists. Despite occasional tensions, such as those between university and parish-based JEC groups, constructive engagement persists. This is evident in outreach efforts during strikes and the consolidation of local Muslim student associations into national bodies. The 1990s witnessed a reconfiguration of religious authority and identity formation, particularly visible in the dynamics between campus-based and parish/church-based associations. These developments illustrate universities' roles as sites of religious experimentation and contestation, where students navi-

gate the complexities of academic demands, religious expectations, and personal autonomy in their quest for the good life. Such elite dynamics have the potential to reshape not only the wider religious landscape but also the relationship between religious groups, educational institutions, and society at large.

This study also reveals the significance of translocal and transnational forces in shaping student activism and religiosity. The early 1970s saw student mobility across Central and West Africa spark the creation of evangelical student associations. Partnerships between Muslim student associations and transnational Islamic NGOs further exemplify this dynamic. The phenomenon of 'AEEMisation' in Francophone West Africa demonstrates the fusion of Islamic student activism across educational levels. Collaborations with global organisations, such as the International Young Catholic Students, the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, and the *Organisation de la Jeunesse Musulmane en Afrique de l'Ouest*, strengthened the regional and international presence of student religious groups in Lomé and Abomey-Calavi, highlighting the interplay between local and global factors in campus religious life.

In recent decades, faith-based student associations have offered a comprehensive social curriculum. Amidst student union conflicts, campus violence, and challenges posed by the LMD system, these groups have provided important support and mediation. Responding to the growing crisis of graduate employability, they have shifted focus to entrepreneurship and job market skills. By creating environments of belonging that facilitate friendships, support networks, and even marriages, these associations demonstrate their adaptability to members' changing needs. Their social curricula, combining academic goals with moral guidance and community support, enrich the university experience and showcase the multifaceted role of faith-based organisations in shaping students' lives and addressing their challenges. This holistic approach offers students a framework for conceptualising and pursuing the good life amidst uncertainty and limited economic opportunity.

The 'entrepreneurial turn' in faith-based student associations' social curricula reflects evolving concepts of religious activism and subjectivity among African students. By focusing on practical skills, business incubation, and leadership training, these groups are redefining their relevance in response to socio-economic challenges in liberalised, development-oriented societies. This approach aligns with broader trends in African Christianity, such as neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel, while finding parallels in Muslim student activism. As these associations position themselves as incubators of responsible citizens and economic drivers, they reshape religion's public role and students' aspirations, offering alternative pathways to the good life that balance material success with spiritual and ethical considerations.

The lasting impact of these associations is evident in their alumni's societal roles. Skills and values developed during student years have propelled many into leadership positions across political, administrative, and religious spheres. This narrative underscores the social curricula's multifaceted value in producing leaders adept at navigating both secular and religious landscapes. Networks like the *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes*, *Amicale des Intellectuels Musulmans du Bénin*, and *Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo* demonstrate sustained religious activism beyond university. While Christian alumni often align with their bishops' conference, Muslim intellectuals take a more proactive approach in influencing their community's leadership, illustrating diverse strategies in shaping public discourse and religious governance.

In recent years, faith-based student activism has undergone a significant transformation, marked by declining engagement due to generational shifts, the pervasive influence of social media, and evolving student priorities. The once-vibrant student associations now face dwindling active participation, reflecting broader socio-economic and cultural changes affecting campus life. As academic pursuits increasingly take precedence over extracurricular activities, the landscape of campus activism has altered dramatically. Former activists argue that younger students, lured by social media's promise of instant gratification, prioritise wealth and fame over traditional forms of volunteerism. This shift has undermined long-standing perceptions of altruism, particularly in the face of economic uncertainty. Moreover, student activism now contends with competition from neighbourhood and parish groups, a challenge further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While digital technologies have helped maintain some level of engagement, they have simultaneously reduced physical participation, signalling a profound shift in community activism.

The evolving religious landscape on these university campuses demands a deeper exploration beyond the apparent decline of structured religious activism. This shift points towards a more sophisticated understanding of religiosity that transcends the confines of formal groups. While the lens of the 'bureaucratisation' of religion provides a valuable framework for examining organised religious associations, it risks overlooking the diverse, 'unorganised' expressions of faith flourishing among students. The rise of social media, demographic shifts, and economic pressures have fundamentally altered the nature of religiosity, favouring personal spiritual journeys over traditional forms of activism. The experiences of Muslim and Christian students, who may identify with their faith in ways not strictly tied to group participation, highlight the complexity of religious expression in this new context. Furthermore, the recent enforcement of dress codes by student unions and university administrations in Benin and Togo, ostensibly aimed at preserving morality and traditional values, indicates a convergence of secular and religious

activism. These efforts to shape a morally aware future elite reflect a broader societal trend of incorporating religious principles into university life, demonstrating the enduring relevance of faith in shaping student identity and educational ethos.

This study of faith-based student associations in Benin and Togo offers broader insights into the role of religion in higher education across Africa and beyond. By chronicling the history of Christian and Muslim student groups at the Universities of Abomey-Calavi and Lomé, this book has illuminated a neglected aspect of West African higher education and provided important perspectives on the evolving relationship between faith, education, and societal change in postcolonial Africa. Far from being marginal, these associations have been instrumental in shaping the academic, social, and political landscapes of their campuses and beyond. Their resilience and adaptability demonstrate how religious groups can effectively navigate and influence secular institutions in diverse contexts. These organisations embody a history of community building that continues to influence the region's trajectory, fostering social cohesion, providing vital support networks, and nurturing future leaders in challenging socio-economic environments.

Ultimately, this study underscores the dynamic role of religion in public life, challenging simplistic notions of secularisation and highlighting the ongoing negotiation between religious identity and civic engagement in contemporary African societies. It reveals how faith-based activism on university campuses reflects and shapes broader societal transformations, offering a unique lens through which to understand the interplay of religion, education, and social change in the postcolonial era. Through these associations, students actively construct and pursue their visions of the good life, reconciling global aspirations with local realities and redefining success in ways that encompass both personal fulfilment and social transformation.

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