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

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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

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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 Britain[4] 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 Dahomey[5] (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.

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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

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8 'Principaux indicateurs socio démographiques (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 intertwined'[12] – 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]

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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

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[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

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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.

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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 education[27] at 10.8% in Benin[28] and 15.1% in Togo,[29] compared to 75% in Germany[30] – 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

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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

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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.

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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 universities[42] 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 Niger[50] and Côte d'Ivoire,[51] positioned as a

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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-

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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.

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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

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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 socioeconomic 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-

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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-

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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 'waithood' 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 'waithood' 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-

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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:

– <u>Catholic</u>: *Jeunesse Étudiante Catholique* (Young Christian Students, JEC)
– <u>Evangelical/Pentecostal</u>: *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)
– <u>Islamic</u>: *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 sociopolitical 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 newspapers[72] 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

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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'Evénement Précis*.

73 *Islam Hebdo, Le Rendez-Vous, Le Pacific*, 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 dimensions[76] 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

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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'

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79 Janson 2020, 420.
80 Schielke 2010; Dağyeli, Freitag and Ghrawi 2021.

refer to formal, bureaucratic forms of collaboration. These include legally consti-tuted associations with established statutes, elected officials, and formal registra-tion 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 under-stand 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, lan-guage clubs, sports teams, alumni groups from secondary schools or colleges, and various prayer groups. Particularly noteworthy are associations formed by stu-dents 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 back-grounds, 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 chal-lenges.

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-

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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.

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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.