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,

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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.

gelical 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 Gbèdjromédé 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, Agbéyomé 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.

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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'Elève et de l'Etudiante 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 'Evénement: 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 Estudiantine 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-Presse* 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 multidisciplinary 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 Taofik 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 Avekor, '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.