

## 7 ‘Too Young’, ‘Immature’, and not Committed Enough: The Decline of Faith-Based Student Organisations?

Faith-based student movements have been integral to campus life at the University of Lomé and the University of Abomey-Calavi since the 1970s. However, many former activists in both Benin and Togo now perceive these organisations as being at a critical juncture. The final chapter evaluates the current state of faith-based activism on these campuses, focusing on the narratives of past and present actors while critically examining claims of decline. The apparent waning of religious student movements raises questions about the long-term impact and sustainability of initiatives that bridge the gap between academic education and professional demands. This perceived decline, attributed not only to COVID-19 measures but also to broader shifts in student priorities and societal values, warrants closer examination.

While compelling, narratives of decline often reflect a generational bias that can obscure the complex realities of social change and adaptation. Rather than a straightforward decline, we may be witnessing a transformation of faith-based student activism, shaped by societal shifts, technological advancements, and evolving student priorities. This chapter unpacks these narratives, exploring both the perceived decline and the underlying factors driving changes in student engagement with religious organisations on campus. Masquelier and Soares argue that understanding youth negotiation within the generational order requires an examination of the interplay of power, knowledge, morality, and authority.<sup>1</sup> Different cohorts of activists, each shaped by unique historical experiences, utilise the past in varying ways to pursue contemporary goals. The invocation of morality and virtue from particular generational perspectives often leads to intergenerational divisions.<sup>2</sup>

The chapter is structured in three parts. First, it explores former members’ reflections on the current landscape of campus faith-based associations, including critiques of student maturity. Second, it presents more nuanced analyses from other activists and current students, contextualising evolving student activism within broader university changes. Finally, it examines new challenges, including less accommodating university authorities, stricter applications of *laïcité*, the per-

---

1 Masquelier and Soares 2016, 15.

2 Whyte, Alber and van der Geest 2008.

ceived influence of Freemasonry, competition from endogenous religions in Benin, and the strategies adopted by Christian and Islamic associations to navigate these challenges.

By examining diverse perspectives and broader institutional and societal contexts, this chapter illuminates the challenges and opportunities facing faith-based student movements in an increasingly individualistic and digitalised world. It cautions against a linear view of increasing campus religiosity post-1990s, instead highlighting the interplay of generational shifts, university policies, and societal changes in shaping faith-based student activism in Benin and Togo. As formal education systems evolve to meet changing labour market and societal needs, the role and influence of faith-based groups on campus may require reassessment. This chapter provides a nuanced understanding of the current landscape, offering insights into the future trajectory of these student movements.

## 7.1 A Bleak Picture: Former Activists Look at the Current Generation on Campus

In recent years, Christian and Muslim student associations at UL and UAC have witnessed a notable decline in activism. This trend, bemoaned by leaders past and present, manifests in dwindling student participation and engagement. Today's students seem less inclined to actively involve themselves, prioritising academic achievement over extracurricular pursuits and exhibiting reluctance to volunteer without direct financial incentives. Several factors contribute to this shift in engagement. The influx of younger, less mature university entrants has altered student demographics. Moreover, social media's pervasive influence has not only reshaped societal values, emphasising material gain over selfless service, but also eroded religious values and moral standards among students. This changing landscape affects both faith-based groups and secular student unions, reflecting broader shifts in student priorities and perspectives.

### A Waning Spirit of Activism

Former activists lament the current cohort's lack of involvement. Despite high 'official' membership figures, actual participation – measured by active engagement and the assumption of leadership roles – remains markedly limited across both Christian and Muslim associations. A JEC-U leader from the 1990s, now a professor at the University of Lomé, observes that today's *Jécistes* lack the visibility and dynamism of their predecessors. Paradoxically, they have access to more resources,



such as social media, yet the burden of initiative rests squarely on alumni shoulders. 'I am no longer a student. So I can't lead the JEC. [...] They have to wake up', he asserts.<sup>3</sup> Another ex-leader echoes these sentiments, noting a stark decline in students' willingness and availability. This is evidenced by dwindling attendance at JEC national camps, a concerning trend, especially considering the 'thousand conveniences' available to today's students. He reflects, 'In the 2000s, we lacked lights, security guards, paved roads, or Wi-Fi on campus – amenities unimaginable in our time.' He adds, 'Now, with WhatsApp, cancelling an appointment takes mere minutes. In our day, you'd have to call the chaplaincy's landline.'<sup>4</sup> Sedoufio, who led the JEC-U at UL from 2017, also witnessed a sharp decline in active membership – those who had paid their dues – from 267 to 138 during his tenure. He attributes this to the current generation's focus on academic pursuits and degree attainment, which overshadow extracurricular involvement and activism in student associations.<sup>5</sup>

This decline in engagement extends beyond mere numbers. Clotaire Deguenon, another former JEC leader, attributes this waning activism to the evolving nature of communication and interaction among members. He recalls a time when the absence of mobile phones and social media fostered a stronger sense of fraternity and unity among *Jécistes*. Members were more inclined to meet in person, creating a vibrant, dynamic movement that thrived on physical presence and direct engagement. Deguenon vividly remembers his tenure as a diocesan leader, traversing Cotonou on his motorbike to distribute correspondence and check on various cells – an activity that invigorated the group. In stark contrast, today's reliance on digital platforms like WhatsApp, while efficient, erodes the fraternal spirit that once defined the JEC. Virtual meetings and organisational activities, though convenient, lack the warmth and immediacy of face-to-face interactions. This shift has not only diminished the cohesion among members but also diluted the impact of their actions on the ground, with the practical, tangible engagement that once mobilised members and facilitated lively debates now conspicuously absent.<sup>6</sup>

Jean Ezékiel Adigbe, the outgoing JEC president in Benin, despite being only slightly older than the current generation, acknowledges this significant decline in student activism. He points to external influences, particularly social media, as diverting attention from the values championed by organisations like the JEC. The allure of instant wealth and internet fame propagated by influencers overshadows the appeal of associations demanding time and dedication, leading to a dimin-

---

<sup>3</sup> Sabin Sonhaye, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Oni Djagnikpo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 23 August 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Sedoufio, in conversation with the author, Google Meet call, 10 November 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Clotaire Deguenon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

ished sense of sacrifice and commitment among young people.<sup>7</sup> Camille Agbeva, the current JEC head, concurs, highlighting social media's impact on perceptions of volunteering. With a prevailing focus on immediate financial gain, students are increasingly reluctant to commit to lengthy meetings or training sessions without direct monetary incentives. This shift necessitates exploring new methods to effectively attract and engage them.<sup>8</sup>

The phenomenon is not limited to Christian associations. Former ACEEMUB members at the University of Abomey-Calavi echo similar sentiments. A member of ACEEMUB's National Council, comprising former activists, emphasised the organisation's struggle with the 'challenge of a declining commitment'.<sup>9</sup> An alumnus, now employed by the UAC, observed a sharp decline in Muslim student involvement over the past decade, lamenting that 'self-giving is losing value'. He recalled a time when commitment was so strong that students would walk considerable distances to participate in activities or to meet with donors, unaided by motorbikes, cars, or taxi fare.<sup>10</sup> The outgoing Secretary General of GBEEB reflected on this stark contrast: a five-kilometre walk was commonplace, whereas today's students baulk at even two kilometres, opting instead to pay for a *Zémidjan*.<sup>11</sup>

A former Amir (2010–13) of the AEEMT highlighted a critical 'lack of human resources' within the organisation. He observed a stark contrast between online engagement and actual participation: while many members actively discuss AEEMT governance in digital forums, only a handful are willing to undertake the necessary work. This reluctance is exacerbated by an increasing focus on personal business ventures, diverting time and interest away from student associations. The former Amir expressed deep concern about the waning spirit of volunteering, noting a paradigm shift from the past ethos of selfless service to God to a prevailing expectation of financial reward:

Activities that we and our older brothers performed voluntarily [*façon bénévole*] now come with financial expectations. Today's youth require compensation for transport and fuel. [...] In the past, people acted for God, sacrificing themselves without expectation. Now, the financial aspect has become paramount, eroding the concept of pure volunteerism [*bénévolat sec sec*]. We've transitioned to a form of paid volunteerism [*volontariat*]. Engaging young people now necessitates monetary incentives. [...] Consequently, the sincerity and intention behind these actions have significantly diminished.<sup>12</sup>

---

7 Camille Agbeva and Jean Ezékiel Adigbe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 4 March 2022.

8 Ibid.

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

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

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

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

The AEEMT Congress in December 2019 further illuminated these ongoing challenges. Abdoul Aziz Gountante, a recent admittee to the *École nationale d'administration* (National School of Administration, ENA), was reluctantly persuaded to assume the role of Amir. The decision underscored the perceived inadequacies of the younger generation, described as 'very bad' (*'craint beaucoup'*). Despite the elders offering coaching to help Gountante balance his studies and activism, the underlying issues persisted. This was evident at the 2022 Congress, where, in an unprecedented move, Gountante was reappointed Amir for another two-year term – a first in AEEMT's history.<sup>13</sup> Gountante's journey with the AEEMT, beginning in Dapaong in 2003 and including a period of inactivity before his eventual rise to leadership,<sup>14</sup> reflects the organisation's struggle to attract and retain committed leaders from newer generations. This pattern of discontinuous engagement and difficulty in finding willing successors epitomises the broader challenge faced by student associations in maintaining organisational continuity and vitality.

The JEC in Benin faces similar challenges. Deguenon notes a general disinterest among members in assuming positions of responsibility, a phenomenon unheard of in his time:

At their recent National Congress, they failed to elect the National Executive Committee due to lack of quorum. So an interim committee was set up, which has never happened in our time. On the contrary, we used to fight for leadership positions. This is where the *Jécistes* get their political training. We took action. We negotiated. We initiated different strategies to take on leadership roles. As a result, a lot of politicians came from our ranks, but we don't see that anymore. There isn't even much enthusiasm for leadership. It's quite strange.<sup>15</sup>

The decline in student activism is not solely attributed to changing attitudes towards leadership and volunteerism. A former member of the JEC-U at the UAC identifies several contributing factors. Chief among these is the intensifying employment challenges facing today's youth, leaving them overwhelmed and directionless. While acknowledging that such problems existed in his era, he notes their increased severity today. Moreover, he points to a significant societal shift: the waning inclination to serve others. The concept of selfless dedication to the common good, once a cornerstone of activism, appears to be fading. Reflecting on his time in the JEC, he recalled how student members' belief in the cause led them to personally fund activities. Their focus extended beyond discussion and prayer to concrete action, such as providing free tutoring for exam classes led by senior

---

<sup>13</sup> AEEMT, 'Journal du congrès - N° 4,' uploaded 3 January 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Aziz Gountante, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 5 August 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Clotaire Deguenon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

members – a form of evangelism through action. In contrast, today's youth exhibit a noticeable lack of self-sacrifice:

The gift of self, activism, all this is lacking because today's young person questions what they can gain by investing time in others. He himself has so many problems to deal with. He says to himself, if I take this time that I'm giving to others, I could have done this or that. He fails to see the inherent value of such investment, unlike us who worked without focusing on personal gain. The youth today have never considered what they themselves might gain by investing in the movement.<sup>16</sup>

This decline in activism is not limited to faith-based groups but extends to secular student unions as well. In Benin, there has been a significant restructuring of student representation within universities under Talon's government. An October 2017 decree redefined how student organisations interact with state and university authorities, requiring a minimum of 30% of the vote for a union to be officially recognised as a student representative. The impact of this change was evident in the July 2018 elections at the UAC, where only UNSEB and FNEB met this requirement, with a mere 18.13% turnout among 63,308 eligible voters. The press also noted the general lack of interest among students.<sup>17</sup> The situation deteriorated further in 2021, with an even lower turnout in subsequent elections. Despite winning a 69.36% share, the leading FNEB failed to attract even 5,000 votes.<sup>18</sup> This declining electoral engagement mirrors the broader trend of waning student activism.

A similar pattern of declining activism is observable in Togo. Even at the University of Lomé campus, once renowned for its student strikes, the last significant movements date back to 2018. This lull in student protest activity at a historically active campus further underscores the widespread nature of this trend across the region, suggesting a broader shift in student engagement and activism. This potential decline in traditional forms of activism echoes Soares and Leblanc's observations on the religious engagement of young Muslims in West Africa since the 1990s. They note that, while the 1990s saw significant mobilisation of Muslim youth through formal structures like national, regional, and neighbourhood associations, alongside political parties, the narrative shifted after 2000. This pivot marked a trend towards a more personalised Islamic identity, termed the 'moralisation of the self', emphasising an individualised spiritual journey.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 11 March 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Adjimehossou, 'Election des organisations faitières...', *Fraternité*, 10 July 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Houngbadji, 'Bénin: résultats définitifs de...', *Benin Web TV*, 2 August 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Soares and LeBlanc 2015.

While student activism's decline is apparent across various organisations, former leaders identify deeper underlying factors beyond changing engagement and communication patterns. They pinpoint issues of maturity and shifting values as pivotal contributors to this trend. The following section examines how the decreasing age of university entrants and perceived erosion of religious principles are reshaping student involvement.

### Immaturity and Eroding Religious Values

A former CIUB activist, the predecessor of ACEEMUB, suggests the issue stems more from immaturity than lack of motivation. He attributes this to students now entering university at younger ages.<sup>20</sup> A former AEEMT Amir concurs, recalling that in his era, most students were over 20 upon enrolment, whereas many are now merely 16 or 17. He questions whether similar results can be achieved given this disparity in maturity levels.<sup>21</sup> Another ex-AEEMT leader agrees, noting younger students' lack of effective leadership skills. He contrasts the older, more capable students of the past, who could organise efficiently, with the current younger cohort requiring guidance themselves.<sup>22</sup> ACEEMUB's first president also emphasises maturity as a critical concern, linking it to premature university entry. This early immersion into university life, coupled with hasty assumption of responsibility, often leads to trivialising important issues, resulting in less effective association participation. Moreover, this immaturity correlates directly with declining commitment, indicating a clear relationship between maturity levels and the quality of student activism.<sup>23</sup>

Two former GBEEB general secretaries highlight the immaturity issue among today's university students. One observes that students are 'still teenagers' upon arrival, lamenting, 'we don't have mature people, adults, to work with like we did in the past.'<sup>24</sup> These young University Bible Group members 'have a different language'.<sup>25</sup> A former CIUB member adds that younger students at all educational levels struggle with issues previously handled with relative ease.<sup>26</sup> Supporting this perspective, a RAJEC member argues that younger age affects not only students' maturity but also their 'intellectual capacity' to comprehend and engage with JEC

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

offerings. This lack of understanding and experience significantly hinders meaningful involvement in student associations.<sup>27</sup> A former JEC-U member, now a University of Lomé professor, bemoans that 'the JEC is increasingly seen by many young people as a place to have fun, rather than a place for training. [...] Discipline, rigour, and work are all part of the JEC. [...] I don't have the impression that the new generations are being trained in this respect.'<sup>28</sup>

Current GBEEB leaders also observe a significant shift due to the younger age of university students. Thrust into an environment demanding responsibility beyond their preparation, these students often exhibit reluctance to take initiative and rely heavily on parental guidance. This demographic shift has necessitated changes in educational materials and teaching methods. A notable example is the adaptation of their Biblical studies curricula, originally designed to engage students at a higher intellectual level. These materials have been revised to suit the younger, less mature university population. The original linguistic complexity, intended to reflect the movement's intellectual aspirations, proved too challenging for these younger students.<sup>29</sup>

The discourse on decreasing university entry age extends beyond student association leaders' insights; it permeates Beninese and Togolese social narratives. A 2021 news article highlighted Togolese universities' increasingly youthful demographics:

Togo's student population is getting younger each year. The era of '*Cartouchard students*'—those who lingered for years—has passed. Now, very young girls and boys enter Togo's public and private universities. In the past, people of a certain age went to university. They were already 'worn out' by years of primary and secondary education. These older men and women had to struggle, after multiple attempts, to obtain their baccalaureate [...]. Today's situation is markedly different. Not only are there more students, but they are also younger. This shift stems from recent demographic explosion and the extreme youthfulness of the Togolese population. Consequently, we see teenagers or those barely out of their teens roaming university campuses. [...] Indeed, it appears that today's students breeze through secondary school. Many avoid repeating years, unlike their predecessors who sometimes attempted the BAC II two, three, four, five or even seven times.<sup>30</sup>

---

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

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

29 Hake Chabi Assa, Fabrice Hounkpevi and Angelo Klanclounon, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 March 2022.

30 'Enseignement supérieur/Togo...', *Le Nouveau Reporter*, 12 February 2021.

Beyond immaturity concerns, former activists have noted a shift in moral values and diminishing regard for religious principles among students. A JEC pioneer in Benin believes today's youth are increasingly influenced by the 'New Age movement', characterised by diverse ideologies and spiritualities that often prioritise human deification and deny God's existence. University students are seen as particularly vulnerable targets for these ideologies, strategically disseminated near campuses. Their precariousness makes them more susceptible, leading them to explore various ideas that may not satisfy their spiritual needs.<sup>31</sup> Echoing this sentiment, two RAJEC members observe that young people are not insulated from societal influences. Many students today gravitate towards activities offering immediate material rewards rather than those providing education or intellectual enrichment. The prevailing youth culture's obsession with material acquisition overshadows the perceived long-term benefits of intellectual and spiritual development. This phenomenon is exacerbated by social media personalities' influence and cybercrime's appeal, contributing to a general decline in activism and reduced involvement in religious groups, including the JEC.<sup>32</sup>

The influence of social media on today's students, often viewed negatively, is a concern shared not only by faith-based association activists but also echoed in the broader social discourse in both countries. In September 2023, an article in *La Nation* delved into the negative effects of social media addiction, illustrating how widespread internet and social network use can alter young people's attitudes and expose them to harm. This excessive online presence can lead to risky behaviour and a decline in moral standards. As one sociologist warned, it can result in 'a depuration of morals and a challenge to the education received at home'.<sup>33</sup> Another article raised concerns about moral decay in Beninese society, citing instances of young people sharing compromising photos or videos online, challenging social norms of modesty. Smartphones facilitate access to such content, while provocative posts by influencers seeking to increase their audience accelerate this moral decline and undermine parental efforts to uphold cultural values.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in Togo, public opinion is wary of social media's mixed effects. An article in *Nouvelle Opinion* critiqued the once-celebrated benefits of social media against its real consequences, highlighting worrying trends among young people active on popular

---

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

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

33 Lantefo, 'Jeunes et réseaux sociaux...', *La Nation*, 13 September 2023.

34 Quenum, 'Dépravation des mœurs au Bénin: quand le téléphone Android devient une source de perversion,' accessed 6 February 2024.

platforms. These concerns include changes in dress codes, behaviour, and attitudes, as well as the dissemination of explicit content, including personal intimate moments.<sup>35</sup>

As highlighted by the RAJEC member, cybercrime poses a major challenge in Benin. The term '*Gayman*' commonly refers to cybercriminals, a label dating back to early scams in which young people, including students and school dropouts, posed as homosexuals to defraud individuals from Western countries. Since the early 2000s, the scope of cybercrime in Benin has expanded significantly to include a wide range of online illegal activities, from fraudulent schemes to sextortion, making it a lucrative operation.<sup>36</sup> To combat this growing problem, the Beninese government has intensified its efforts by establishing specialised agencies,<sup>37</sup> resulting in the imprisonment of over 1,000 people for cybercrime between 2020 and 2023.<sup>38</sup> Amidst these developments, in May 2022, the Bishops of Benin expressed deep concern about the growing tendency among young people to seek quick wealth. They observed a significant moral decline among the younger generation, highlighted in the Bishops' Conference's final communiqué, which pointed to widespread problems such as fraud, the trivialisation of sexual content on social media, and acts motivated 'by the lure of easy gain' and 'committed with contempt for human dignity'.<sup>39</sup>

It is worth noting that this discourse of generational decline is not unique to faith-based student organisations. Similar narratives of youth disengagement and moral decay permeate various sectors of social life, from politics to education to the workplace. This 'degenerative discourse' often reflects broader societal anxieties about change and can be traced throughout history.<sup>40</sup> Understanding this context helps us to critically examine these narratives and look beyond them to the underlying social dynamics at play.

Historically, Christian and Islamic associations on university campuses have addressed concerns about students' moral and ethical behaviour. However, recent years have also seen student unions and university authorities increasingly engaging with these issues. In June 2016, a notable development occurred when the three main student unions at the University of Abomey-Calavi – FNEB, UNEB, and UNSEB

---

35 Antarou, 'Mauvais usage des réseaux sociaux...', *Nouvelle Opinion*, 3 July 2023.

36 Tasso 2014; Akodande Honma 2022.

37 Linkpon, 'CNIN: un Centre d'investigations numériques pour la lutte anti-cybercriminalité,' accessed 26 January 2024.

38 Linkpon, 'Cybercriminalité au Bénin: l'inquiétant bilan chiffré de la traque,' accessed 22 September 2023.

39 Eblotié, 'Bénin: l'épiscopat appelle...', *La Croix Africa*, 20 May 2022.

40 Mannheim 1952.



– introduced a strict dress code, specifically targeting clothing deemed indecent or provocative among female students. The student union leaders emphatically declared: ‘Students, it is formally forbidden to wear tights, mini-skirts, mini-dresses, mini-jeans and other indecent and reprehensible outfits at UAC. No to the corruption of morals! No to acculturation! No to blind Western imitation! Long live our Mecca of knowledge and education!’<sup>41</sup>

This dress code sparked considerable debate among the student body. Rumours circulated that Rector Brice Sinsin supported its enforcement, with the tacit approval of the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, adding to the controversy. However, the university administration unequivocally denied these rumours. In a statement aimed at clarifying the situation, the rectorate distanced itself from the memo entitled ‘Ban on sexy dress for women and girls at the University of Abomey-Calavi’ and denied any involvement. The administration urged an end to rumours and called on the university community to maintain a climate of calm.<sup>42</sup>

While initial efforts by student union leaders to enforce a dress code at the UAC struggled to gain administrative support, the initiative has seen a resurgence under the current rector, Félicien Avlessi. Taking a firm stance, Rector Avlessi has recently declared strict enforcement of a dress code, targeting what he perceives as moral decline within the campus community. On 21 October 2022, he issued a statement specifying unacceptable clothing on university premises, such as low-rise trousers, tank tops, skirts cut above the knee, miniskirts, clothing with excessive slits, and low-cut tops. Avlessi’s directive, which emphasises the UAC’s educational mission and the maintenance of ethical standards, warns that students violating these norms will be dismissed from class and ‘sent home to their parents’, applying the policy uniformly to all students regardless of gender.<sup>43</sup> This renewed emphasis on a strict dress code has sparked conversations and debate not only within the student body but across Beninese society, reflecting broader concerns about values, identity, and the role of educational institutions in shaping societal norms.

The University of Kara in Togo has also taken steps to regulate student dress by introducing a dress code in January 2021. This policy emphasises the importance of appropriate dress as a component of educational and professional readiness. While uniforms are not required for all except those in professional programmes, the university insists that students’ attire during academic sessions meets certain

---

41 ‘Le port de tenues sexy et indécentes...,’ *Les 4 Vérités*, 15 June 2016.

42 Hessoun, ‘Affaire interdiction des tenues...,’ *La Nouvelle Tribune*, 15 June 2016.

43 ‘Uac: le port des tenues...,’ *Le Matinal*, 25 October, 2022; Hounghbadji, ‘UAC: ‘les étudiants en tenues...,’ *Benin Web TV*, 28 October 2022.

standards. In a published column, the university's Directorate of Communications underlined the policy's broader aim:

It's all about the education and training of the national elite! [...] Decency is one of the fundamental rules of social and public life. It is not up for negotiation. [...] The university is contributing to expand family education through its *Campus Citoyen* [Citizen Campus] programme, one of the aims of which is to help students develop soft skills, particularly in preparing for job interviews. [...] Universities are no longer just about producing graduates! It is now about preparing them for the world of work. [...] Students are being sacked by company directors or heads of department because their dress is deemed inappropriate. [...] For some, dress is so sloppy that it devalues the student's image in society. [...] In the city they're free to dress as they please, but on campus there's a pause. 'There are more important things to do,' some might say. And it's precisely the students' professional integration and future that are urgent, and the dress code is one way of achieving this.<sup>44</sup>

In a related development, whilst the University of Lomé has not adopted a campus-wide dress code, one of its institutes, the Institut des Métiers de la Mer, has taken a more targeted approach. From September 2022, the institute announced restrictions on baggy, tight, or torn trousers, and miniskirts<sup>45</sup>. This move reflects a growing trend among educational institutions to address perceived issues of inappropriate attire, albeit on a more localised scale.

The implementation of dress codes by student unions and university administrations presents an intriguing paradox, reflecting a complex evolution in student activism. While these measures appear conservative, potentially suggesting religious motivations, they also represent a new form of student engagement that diverges from traditional progressive narratives. This shift raises a compelling question: Could the perceived decline in conventional student activism be partially attributed to the success of earlier activists in 'moralising' campus life?

This transformation in student engagement is occurring against a backdrop of broader societal shifts, including the influx of younger students, the pervasive influence of social media, and changing perceptions of volunteerism and leadership. The decline in engagement among both Christian and Muslim student associations mirrors these changes, yet paradoxically, as traditional forms of activism wane, new expressions of student agency have emerged. These developments highlight the evolving nature of student priorities and the complex interplay between religious values, cultural norms, and perceptions of professionalism in academic settings. The changing landscape not only reflects the evolving nature of youth

---

<sup>44</sup> 'Tribune: l'Université de Kara officialise...', *24heureinfo*, 25 January 2021.

<sup>45</sup> 'Université de Lomé: l'I2M interdit...', *24heureinfo*, 22 September 2022.

culture and religious expression in West Africa but also raises important questions about the future role of student organisations in shaping campus life and influencing wider societal discourse.

## 7.2 Reassessing Student Engagement: A Nuanced Perspective on University Life and Faith-Based Associations

This section challenges simplistic narratives of declining student engagement by examining the insights of past and present members of Christian and Islamic associations. It unveils a spectrum of views from pioneers critically reflecting on their mentoring approaches to current students navigating financial constraints and evolving societal expectations. The landscape of university life has undergone significant transformations. Competition from parish cells and neighbourhood associations has reshaped student involvement in campus activities and activism. Moreover, the expansion of universities, coupled with insufficient on-campus accommodation, has dispersed students across urban areas, complicating the efforts of faith-based associations to convene regular on-campus meetings.

### Bridging Generational Perspectives

Several former activists of faith-based student organisations offer a more nuanced assessment of current campus cohorts, cautioning against wholly negative portrayals. The first general secretary of GBEEB emphasises the importance of recognising shifting contexts and mentalities. He warns against hastily judging the new generation's engagement as inferior, suggesting that perceived differences may stem from fundamentally divergent perspectives. This insight underscores the necessity of understanding and valuing contemporary students' views while acknowledging potential generational gaps.<sup>46</sup> Echoing this balanced stance, a former AEEMT president reflects on the natural inclination of founders to scrutinise their organisation's evolution critically: 'As pioneers, we often look back and feel things haven't progressed as envisioned. Isn't this sometimes a complex? We imagine ourselves superior. [...] However, we must humbly acknowledge that today's young leaders often surpass us in Arabic proficiency and religious practice.'<sup>47</sup> Similarly, ACEEMUB's first president, despite reservations about the current generation's maturity, recognises

---

<sup>46</sup> Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Yaya Assadou Kolani and AEEMT leader, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 15 May 2019.

a commendable advancement: today's ACEEMUB activists demonstrate a deeper understanding of Islam and greater Arabic fluency than their predecessors.<sup>48</sup>



**Fig. 13:** Catholic Chaplaincy of the Université d'Abomey-Calavi et des grandes écoles du Bénin, 16 March 2022, photo by the author.

While criticism of the new generation is prevalent among former activists, some point to shortcomings within the older cohort itself. The outgoing general secretary of GBEEB expresses dismay at the lack of financial backing from 'Friends of GBEEB' – former activists now in the workforce. He laments that many 'cadres who have benefited from the GBU ministry do not give' and 'abandon the ministry', falling into 'the trap of never finishing securing themselves'. These same individuals criticise the youth while 'the GBU, which is almost 50 years old, does not even have a vehicle'. He contends that effective service necessitates financial stability, which is currently absent.<sup>49</sup> The chaplain of the Université d'Abomey-Calavi et des grandes écoles du Bénin echoes this sentiment, bemoaning the 'abandonment' of respon-

<sup>48</sup> Ambdel Gannille Inoussa, in conversation with the author, WhatsApp call, 14 March 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

sibility by former Emmaüs participants now in professional or political spheres. He argues these individuals are not doing enough to assist students in securing employment or completing the long-unfinished chapel on the edge of the campus.<sup>50</sup> This criticism underscores a perceived rift between past and present members, with calls for increased involvement from those who have previously reaped the benefits of these communities.

The challenge of alumni disengagement extends beyond Christian groups to Muslim organisations. A former ACEEMUB member noted the association's aim 'to turn its members into Islamically competent intellectuals who can defend the values of Islam'. However, he observed a trend of activists becoming 'dispersed' as they transition from university to professional life, often neglecting their ACEEMUB engagement.<sup>51</sup> In Togo, the 2019 AEEMT congress resolved to create a board of former activists, aiming to bolster governance with experienced insight and to provide mentorship.<sup>52</sup> This initiative also seeks to foster cooperation between AEEMT and ACMT, addressing human resource challenges exacerbated by member departures.<sup>53</sup>

RAJEC Benin has taken proactive steps to address the JEC's waning momentum. Recognising the need for support, RAJEC leaders have committed to reinvigorating youth activism by establishing monitoring committees at each level. However, they acknowledge that daily commitments limit their involvement, despite growing youth disengagement. RAJEC plans workshops to examine JEC activism challenges and assess their own culpability: 'Whatever we say, we can't put all the blame on them. We, the elders, have some responsibility. That's for sure, because activism didn't drop out of the blue. It's just that it went downhill gradually. Maybe we didn't sound the alarm early enough to correct things when they needed correcting.'<sup>54</sup> Current JEC leaders, being students, often lack financial independence and rely on older members for activity organisation.<sup>55</sup>

Contrastingly, a former JEC-U member in Togo emphasises the importance of allowing the new generation space for independent growth. While occasional assistance is appropriate, he argues that elders should step back to let students experience, challenge, and develop autonomously. He observes that excessive involvement from elders can hinder young people's independence and ability to overcome

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

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

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

53 Ibid.

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

55 Camille Agbeva and Jean Ezékiel Adigbe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 4 March 2022.

shyness and dependency. Only when given the freedom to take initiative and fully assume responsibility can students develop into societal leaders.<sup>56</sup>

While intergenerational dynamics play a crucial role in shaping student organisations, another pressing issue exists: the financial challenges faced by today's students and the associations that support them. This next section delves into the economic realities that significantly impact student engagement and the sustainability of faith-based groups.

### The Challenge of Survival and the Pursuit of Financial Independence

Some elders and current members of faith-based associations offer a nuanced perspective on the challenges confronting today's students, tempering the often bleak assessment held by older generations. The chaplain at the UAC highlights the stark reality: 'Catholic students face the challenge of survival because they are not at all assured of tomorrow.' Students grapple with finding money for food, rent, and tuition, all whilst haunted by 'this tenacious fear that holds them. [...] When I finish, what will become of me?'<sup>57</sup> The chaplaincy's ability to provide financial assistance is severely limited, with the chaplain himself contributing only modestly from personal resources. This financial precarity is particularly concerning given the competitive environment on campus. The chaplain notes that esoteric groups and Pentecostal sects, which proliferate in the area, 'put money up front to recruit' students 'who have a lot of difficulty making ends meet'.<sup>58</sup>

In Togo, the moderator of the *Paroisse Universitaire Saint-Jean Apôtre* (University Parish of St John the Apostle) has implemented a holistic approach to student support. Recognising the challenges faced by Togolese students, the parish extends its remit beyond spiritual guidance to address material needs. Their assistance ranges from distributing basic foodstuffs to providing paid employment opportunities for students seeking work experience. The parish employs students for up to two years in roles such as garden maintenance, offering a modest income. In 2021, they further bolstered educational support by partially funding masters-level tuition fees for five students. Additionally, the CCU provides temporary accommodation for up to four students from remote areas, allowing them time to secure permanent housing in Lomé.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Modeste Lemon, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 November 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Ephrem Cyprien Houndje, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 14 March 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Marc Folivi, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 1 September 2021.

GBEEB faces similar financial constraints due to its self-financing model, which deliberately eschews reliance on external aid. This approach, as explained by GBEEB's first general secretary, marks a significant departure from the financial dependency often observed in religious organisations, particularly those with foreign mission ties. He identifies financial dependence as a key challenge for many Beninese churches, which frequently rely on Western partners, raising concerns about their sustainability without such support. A pivotal moment came at a 2002 GBUAF regional meeting, at which the Beninese delegation successfully advocated for the rejection of all external financial support. Their argument centred on the belief that financial independence was not only achievable but also essential for the movement's continued viability and integrity. This bold stance quickly yielded results: by 2003, through effective member-driven financial mobilisation, GBEEB's budget had impressively doubled from four to eight million CFA francs.<sup>60</sup> However, this steadfast commitment to self-reliance brings its own set of challenges. The former secretary-general acknowledges that GBEEB's limited financial resources may diminish its appeal:

I cannot condemn young people who are not committed, that they are not this, they do not do that [...] A student who is at the university sees his comrade in the *Gayman* system coming to campus in a car or on a motorbike. He says, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and he sleeps hungry. [...] And the GBU is not even able to give him a bag of rice or two kilos of corn. So how can he be recruited? [...] Obviously, the young people are weary of seeing good graces on the other side, but here there is nothing. So how do you expect them to really get involved? It is difficult.<sup>61</sup>

This sentiment is echoed by a GBEEB activist reflecting on the challenges faced by Beninese youth:

Today, we, the youth, are primarily focused on securing our livelihood. In Benin, without a means to earn a living, especially for one's independence, one must work diligently. Our parents, who have invested in our education and future, rely on us for support. The pressure to meet their expectations after such investments can be overwhelming. Additionally, there are limited job opportunities for young people in Benin, compelling us to create our own employment. We constantly ponder how to succeed and build a better life, as the cost of living continues to rise.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

<sup>62</sup> Noé Dekenou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 17 March 2022.

A current Bible group leader sheds light on the evolving financial context for students and its impact on group activities. He notes that when GBEEB was founded, most university students received scholarships, fostering a culture of financial solidarity. However, this situation has drastically changed, with most students no longer receiving such support. This shift has strained the group's self-support system, leading to increased dependence on alumni contributions. He emphasises the importance of recognising this altered financial landscape to avoid unfairly criticising students for their reduced financial contributions compared to previous scholarship-supported generations.<sup>63</sup>

A young former JEC-U leader reflects on the changing nature of student involvement over time. He observes that even five years ago, when he was actively involved in JEC, there was a perception that his generation's engagement fell short of the previous decade's standards. This perception of a continuous shift in engagement appears to be a recurring theme, expected to persist into the future. He emphasises that personal circumstances significantly impact student engagement. For instance, a student working to support themselves will have different priorities and methods of engagement compared to one whose basic needs are met at home.<sup>64</sup> The parish priest moderator of the university parish in Lomé adds another dimension to the discussion, pointing out that the introduction of the LMD system has reduced students' free time due to different course timetables. Consequently, students often prefer to return home rather than spend their limited free time at the CCU.<sup>65</sup> This change in academic structure has inadvertently affected students' availability and willingness to engage in extracurricular activities.

While financial constraints and academic pressures significantly impact student engagement, these factors alone do not fully explain the changing landscape of faith-based student associations. The transformation of university environments and the emergence of alternative spaces for religious engagement have further complicated the situation. This shift in the physical and social geography of student life has given rise to a new challenge: competition from parishes and neighbourhood associations.

---

<sup>63</sup> Hake Chabi Assa, Fabrice Hounkpevi and Angelo Klanclounon, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 March 2022.

<sup>64</sup> Wilfrid Abessan, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 17 November 2022.

<sup>65</sup> Marc Folivi, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 1 September 2021.



## Competition from Parishes and Neighbourhood Associations

The evolving landscape of public universities has become a pivotal factor in the transformation of student activism. This shift is illustrated by the changing face of campus life at the University of Lomé. A former JEC-U activist from the 1990s reminisces about a time when the university provided on-campus housing for nearly all students. The university restaurant, serving as a central hub, offered affordable, quality meals that enabled students to comfortably remain on campus round the clock, thus fostering a vibrant environment for various campus activities.<sup>66</sup>

The geographical expansion of Lomé has further altered the university experience. Another former JEC-U leader recalls that, in the 2000s, ‘Lomé was not from Baguida to Adidogomé’, allowing students to reach campus easily by bicycle or on foot with friends. Today, however, the city’s sprawl has dramatically increased commuting times, complicating the organisation of student meetings.<sup>67</sup> A similar scenario is unfolding at the University of Abomey-Calavi, where surging enrolment has outpaced the availability of on-campus accommodation. Consequently, many students must seek housing elsewhere in the city, leading to a dispersal that hampers regular attendance at campus meetings and prayer sessions. This geographical fragmentation has significantly impacted the frequency and ease of organising gatherings.<sup>68</sup>

Compounding these challenges is the rising competition from neighbourhood associations and parish or church groups, particularly affecting the JEC in Togo and Benin. Many activists now gravitate towards parish-based JEC groups rather than university-level participation. This shift has prompted concern among former leaders, with one Togolese JEC-U leader lamenting that the ‘JEC has somehow lost its soul’. He argues that the organisation’s primary mission to ‘transform the life environment’ of the *Jécistes* should ideally focus on their educational institutions.<sup>69</sup> This sentiment reverberates among other elders, who note that JEC-U meetings increasingly occur off-campus, either in the university parish or various city locations, rather than in the traditional CCU on campus.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, a former head of the JEC-U in Lomé noted that the continued involvement of university students in school-level JEC cells, while commendable, raises concerns about their potential to overshadow younger members. Their presence may inadvertently lead to

---

<sup>66</sup> Sabin Sonhaye, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

<sup>67</sup> Michel Oni Djagnikpo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 23 August 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Ephrem Cyprien Houndje, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 14 March 2022.

<sup>69</sup> Théophile Tonyeme, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 7 September 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Sabin Sonhaye, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 10 September 2021.

the imposition of outdated ideas or domination of decision-making processes, as younger students tend to defer to their older counterparts.<sup>71</sup>



**Fig 14:** Centre Saint Jean Lomé (Saint-Jean Apôtre university parish), 1 September 2021, photo by the author.

In the early 2000s, the Bishop of Lomé entrusted the Brothers of St John with overseeing the university chaplaincy, tasking them to develop a pastoral service tailored to the academic environment. This initiative culminated in 2004 with the incorporation of the CCU into the Saint-Jean Apôtre university parish.<sup>72</sup> The Brothers' ministry now spans two locations: the Centre Saint-Jean, housing the parish church and Jean-Paul II media library, and the CCU on the university campus. The Centre Saint-Jean stands as a multidisciplinary space designed to cater to the university community's educational, cultural, and spiritual needs.<sup>73</sup> This facility boasts an array of services, including a library and a cyber centre offering student-friendly

<sup>71</sup> Raymond Sedoufio, in conversation with the author, Google Meet call, 10 November 2022.

<sup>72</sup> Marc Folivi, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 1 September 2021.

<sup>73</sup> 'Mission,' accessed 3 September 2021.

rates. Furthermore, a dedicated study area with Wi-Fi coverage has been established to enhance students' academic pursuits. Despite these impressive amenities, a challenge persists. The priest moderator observes that Sunday mass attendees are predominantly non-university students. This paradox is attributed to the parish's location, which is relatively far from where most students live.<sup>74</sup>

In Benin, the JEC faces similar challenges to its Togolese counterpart. The outgoing JEC president reports that the majority of chapters in Cotonou and Abomey-Calavi are parish-based, with only a small fraction situated in schools. This parish-centric distribution has led to a decline in university-based JEC participation, particularly evident at the University of Abomey-Calavi, although the movement maintains a stronger presence at the University of Parakou. To counter this imbalance, the JEC National Council has devised a strategic action plan aimed at reinvigorating the movement within educational institutions. The current JEC leadership has shifted its focus towards Catholic schools, although the movement is authorised by the Ministry of the Interior to operate in all Beninese schools and universities. However, the implementation of *laïcité* presents varying challenges, with acceptance of religious movements like JEC contingent upon individual school denominational affiliations and directors' interpretations of secular principles.<sup>75</sup>

RAJEC leaders in Benin are grappling with the tension between parish-based and institution-based JEC chapters. While there is a consensus that JEC should ideally maintain a stronger presence in educational institutions, the difficulties in obtaining necessary permissions have forced the movement to expand within parishes to maintain its vitality. Some advocate propose a flexible approach, championing the coexistence of parish and school chapters to broaden the movement's reach. This strategy is bolstered by the general support of parish priests for Catholic action movements like JEC.<sup>76</sup>

The AEEMT faces similar challenges to the JEC, particularly in the form of internal competition stemming from a burgeoning network of neighbourhood youth associations in Lomé. Ironically, many of these local Islamic associations have been established by former AEEMT activists, creating direct competition by organising similar events and activities. This proliferation of Islamic youth groups has led to a saturation of familiar initiatives: seminars, training sessions, sermons, conferences, and round-table discussions. However, the most significant impact has been

---

<sup>74</sup> Marc Folivi, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 1 September 2021.

<sup>75</sup> Camille Agbeva and Jean Ezékiel Adigbe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 4 March 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Emile Eteka, Elvis Vitoule and Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

felt in the realm of Qur'an recitation competitions during Ramadan, long considered AEEMT's flagship event. A member of the association laments this shift: 'In the past, AEEMT was the only one to do it and there we had all the sponsors, all the people who can contribute financially and materially for the success of the competition. Now, as and when such and such association initiates it, they call upon the same sponsors.'<sup>77</sup> Despite this intensified competition for resources and attention, the AEEMT continues to hold its annual National Qur'an Recitation Competition. In 2024, this event will celebrate its 28<sup>th</sup> edition, maintaining its popularity and broad support within Togo's Muslim community.

In sum, whilst some elders bemoan dwindling participation, a more nuanced perspective acknowledges generational shifts, financial pressures, and evolving university environments. Students are grappling with significant economic hurdles, curtailing their ability to fully engage in extracurricular activities. Concurrently, the trend of students living off-campus in the city, coupled with the rise of parish and neighbourhood associations, has reshaped the landscape of student involvement. The focus now shifts to the new challenges facing faith-based associations on campus. The next section explores how stricter enforcement of *laïcité*, competition from endogenous religions, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have transformed the environment. Furthermore, it examines how the struggle for space, particularly at the University of Abomey-Calavi, has forced many groups to adapt their strategies, often relocating activities off-campus or to informal settings.

### 7.3 Navigating New Challenges: Religious Groups' Adaptation to a Changing University Landscape

Christian groups, especially on the Abomey-Calavi campus, express growing concern over the influence of esoteric movements such as Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism. These movements are perceived to wield considerable power among university authorities, potentially undermining religious life on campus. Simultaneously, a revival of endogenous religions, notably Vodun in Benin, is intensifying the competition by Christian and Muslim groups for recognition and influence. In both Benin and Togo, the Covid-19 pandemic has catalysed a rapid digital transformation within these religious organisations, propelling them towards online platforms for activities and engagement. However, this shift has led to a decline in physical presence post-pandemic. Moreover, the increasingly stringent application of *laïcité* by university authorities, particularly in Benin, presents new obstacles,

---

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

notably restricting access to campus facilities for religious gatherings. The struggle for space, exemplified by the difficulty in securing classrooms for activities, underscores the disparities in the treatment of religious groups within these academic environments. This challenge is particularly acute at the University of Abomey-Calavi, where many organisations have been compelled to relocate their activities off-campus or to informal settings.

### Freemasonry and the Competition from the Endogenous Religions

In Benin, and to a lesser extent in Togo, some Catholics and evangelicals perceive that esoteric movements, particularly the Rosicrucians and Freemasons, have gained substantial influence on university campuses, including within the administrative echelons at the University of Abomey-Calavi. This perceived influence is thought to foster an increasingly hostile attitude towards religious groups on campus. This is the case of the campus chaplain<sup>78</sup> and former GBEEB leader, who assert ‘We know that most of the leaders who are now running our country are Freemasons. And Freemasonry and Christianity do not go together.’<sup>79</sup> In Togo, a former *Jéciste*, now a professor at the University of Lomé, recounted his personal experience of refusing to join Freemasonry, claiming the decision had impeded his career advancement.<sup>80</sup> While the precise nature and extent of Freemasonry’s influence remain elusive, these beliefs frequently surface in discussions, shaping the narrative of religious life on campus.

In Benin and Togo, as across the African continent,<sup>81</sup> Freemasonry evokes a mix of fascination, apprehension, and speculation. Its members are often perceived as wielding considerable influence in business and political spheres. High-profile figures, including former President Boni Yayi and President Faure Gnassingbé, have faced persistent rumours about their Masonic affiliations, allegations both have denied. The significance of Freemasonry in Benin was further underscored by Benoît Kouassi, who served as grand master of the country’s Grand Lodge and Executive Secretary of African Freemasonry from July 2019 until his death in April 2020.<sup>82</sup> Historically, the relationship between the Catholic Church in Benin and Freemasonry has been fraught with tension. The resignation of Archbishop Marcel

---

<sup>78</sup> Ephrem Cyprien Houndje, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 14 March 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Jacob Djossou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 19 March 2022.

<sup>80</sup> Pierre Radji, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 30 August 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Akindès and Miran-Guyon 2017.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Franc-maçonnerie en Afrique....’ *Jeune Afrique*, 26 July 2019.

Agboton of Cotonou in 2010 was purportedly linked to his Masonic membership. Similarly, in 2017, a parish in Cotonou refused to celebrate a requiem mass for José Dominique Loko, Côte d'Ivoire's honorary consul in Benin and acting grand master of the Grand Masonic Lodge of Benin since 2016, citing his Masonic ties.<sup>83</sup> These episodes illuminate the underlying tensions and mistrust permeating the Beninese Christian community towards Freemasonry, highlighting how perceptions of this movement influence the religious and social landscape in Benin.

While Freemasonry presents one set of challenges, the resurgence of endogenous religions adds another layer of complexity to the religious landscape on campus. At the University of Abomey-Calavi, the increasing visibility of endogenous religions (*religions endogènes*), particularly Vodun, among both students and professors, has become a growing concern for evangelical groups. A former GBEEB official emphasised that Vodun, unlike other religious practices, often enjoys a degree of exemption from *laïcité* due to its deep cultural roots.<sup>84</sup> This unique position contributes to Vodun's renewed strength and visibility on campus. In this context, the role of Professor Dodji Amouzouvi, Pontiff of the God Sakpata and head of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Abomey-Calavi, is particularly noteworthy. As a prominent advocate of Vodun, Amouzouvi founded the *Laboratoire d'Analyse et de Recherche Religions, Espaces et Développement* (Laboratory for Analysis and Research on Religions, Spaces and Development, LARRED) in 2014.<sup>85</sup> LARRED has since played an instrumental role in producing research on Vodun and advocating for the recognition of endogenous religions.

In March 2017, LARRED organised a symposium on *laïcité* in Benin, championing the recognition of endogenous religions. Despite secularism being enshrined in the constitution, Amouzouvi critiqued the erosion of this principle, arguing that it often falls victim to biased interpretations and social injustice towards endogenous religions.<sup>86</sup> More recently, LARRED's ballets, made up of students and doctoral candidates, presented the show '*Cordon Omilical*' (Umbilical Cord) in Cotonou in August 2022. This performance aimed to reconnect the Beninese people with African traditions by dramatising, through song and dance, the results of research into various Vodun deities.<sup>87</sup> Amouzouvi aligns this theme with President Talon's vision of promoting Beninese culture, stating, 'We are following in the footsteps

<sup>83</sup> Sarr, 'L'Église béninoise refuse...', *La Croix Africa*, 20 November 2017.

<sup>84</sup> Jacob Djossou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 19 March 2022.

<sup>85</sup> Gbeto, 'Commémoration des 5 ans du Larred...', *L'Événement Précis*, 10 April 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Doltaire, 'Symposium sur la laïcité...', *Nord Sud Quotidien*, 28 March 2017.

<sup>87</sup> Yaï, 'Entretien avec le professeur Dodji...', *Fraternité*, 5 August 2022.

of the President of the Republic, who is making culture a structuring pillar of our development, our revelation and Africa's influence on the roof of the world.'<sup>88</sup>

In recent years, President Talon, despite his Catholic background, has made the promotion of Vodun a cornerstone of his administration's cultural agenda. This shift is exemplified by the transformation of the annual 10 January celebration into a two-day event, the Vodun Days, held in Ouidah.<sup>89</sup> The government also established the Vodun Rites Committee (*'Comité des rites Vodun'*) in September 2023. This committee, tasked with promoting religious tourism centred on Vodun practices, is headed by Mahougnon Kakpo, a professor of African literature at the UAC, with Dodji Amouzouvi as a member.<sup>90</sup> The formation of this committee marked a significant step towards officially recognising and promoting Vodun as a vital part of Benin's cultural heritage.

In November 2023, the Minister for Tourism, Culture and the Arts presented the Vodun Days as a key component of the ambitious 'Benin Revealed' (*'Bénin Révélé'*) programme. This initiative aims to showcase Benin's cultural distinctiveness and stimulate tourism. The Vodun Days are part of a broader strategy to valorise Vodun heritage, which includes the creation of the International Vodun Museum in Porto-Novo and the Vodun Monasteries Route (*'Route des couvents Vodun'*). Notably, the Minister emphasised that while adhering to the principle of *laïcité*, the state actively supports diverse religious events and the preservation and authentic representation of heritage to strengthen social cohesion. Through these efforts, Benin aims to leverage its cultural and religious wealth to promote tourism and enhance its global cultural contribution.<sup>91</sup>

The government's commitment to promoting Vodun culture was further underscored during the Vodun Days celebrations, where President Talon himself was present. In a media interview, he articulated the rationale behind this cultural shift:

Unfortunately, the spread of the religions of the book, especially Christianity and Islam, has cast the religion of Vodun in such a negative light that Africans have abandoned what is part of their own identity, history, and heritage in favour of imported religions [...]. But we have also somewhat abandoned, or even begun to be ashamed of, this beautiful philosophy that is the African philosophy of the relationship between God and man. And Vodun is sometimes practised in secret, or people are ashamed of it. And many of our Christian and Muslim compatriots have this double religious practice. In broad daylight, what comes from the imported

---

<sup>88</sup> Akéké, 'Cordon ombilical': le Larred..., *Banouto*, 10 August 2022.

<sup>89</sup> 'La cité historique de Ouidah accueille les Vodun Days, les 9 et 10 janvier 2024,' accessed 13 November 2023.

<sup>90</sup> Agbon, 'Tourisme religieux autour du Vodun...', *Bénin Intelligent*, 19 October 2023.

<sup>91</sup> 'Initiative des Vodun Days: le Ministre ABIMBOLA dévoile le contexte et le contenu alléchant des festivités,' accessed 18 January 2024.

religion and, more discreetly, what belongs to our real identity. We said that it would be good for Benin's influence, for development, for everything, if we could get back to our own identity. [...] And we also want to take this opportunity to deconstruct everything that has been wrongly portrayed in a negative way, everything that has been said about the Vodun religion, claiming that this religion is the emanation of evil and the like. [...] Besides, Benin is secular, the state is secular, and we have not promoted one spirituality against another. That's why we are presenting more of the cultural, artistic and identity aspects of Vodun, without promoting Vodun spirituality.<sup>92</sup>

As mentioned above, Soglo's establishment of the annual endogenous religions celebration and the Ouidah 92 festival faced significant opposition from the Catholic Church, which argued that such state promotion of Vodun undermined the principle of *laïcité*.<sup>93</sup> The Vodun festival has since drawn criticism, particularly from evangelical Christian groups who often view Vodun as satanic. President Boni Yayi notably abstained from participating in official celebrations. In 2016, evangelical pastor John Migan petitioned the Constitutional Court to abolish the holiday and remove the phrase 'spirits of the ancestors' (*mânes des ancêtres*) from the presidential oath, citing *laïcité* concerns. However, his request was rejected.<sup>94</sup> Consequently, some in Benin perceive the Vodun Days event as a violation of *laïcité*, exacerbating the frustration of Vodun proponents who argue that *laïcité* has been applied inconsistently, often to Vodun's detriment.<sup>95</sup> Despite this, the Vodun Rites Committee chairman maintains that Vodun merits recognition as a legitimate religion.<sup>96</sup>

Christian and Islamic student associations face an additional challenge in the emergence of the pan-Africanist Kemite (or Kamit) movement. Advocating a return to African values and roots, these intellectuals are 'vehemently opposed to both Christianity and Islam because they say that African religion has been sidelined and demonised', as one GBEEB pioneer noted.<sup>97</sup> This stance complicates evangelisation efforts by organisations like GBEEB on university campuses. Through various awareness-raising activities, Kemite groups challenge established religious narratives and promote an alternative perspective emphasising the value of indigenous African religious and cultural traditions. Such initiatives are likely to resonate with

92 Ahougnon, 'Entretien avec Patrice Talon: 'On a même commencé à avoir un peu honte de cette belle philosophie africaine,' accessed 13 January 2024.

93 Tall 1995, 200–01.

94 'Recours au sujet de la célébration...', *L'Événement Précis*, 20 February 2017.

95 Agbon, 'Bénin, une laïcité de trompe-l'œil?', *Bénin Intelligent*, 26 January 2024.

96 Agbon, 'Au Bénin, la première religion...', *Bénin Intelligent*, 9 January 2024.

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



students and professors seeking to reconnect with their African heritage. As the former Secretary General of GBEEB observes:

The Gospel has encountered traditional respondents from endogenous cults on its path, making faith discussions with students on campus challenging. [...] They often argue, 'No, that's for White people. The Gospel is for White people. Our parents never practised this, so why are you here? You are the emissaries of white missionaries. [...] This is not going to lead us anywhere.'<sup>98</sup>

Faith-based student associations faced an entirely different set of challenges with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. The global health crisis not only disrupted traditional forms of engagement but also catalysed a significant shift in how these organisations operate. The pandemic compelled a swift transition to digital platforms, fundamentally reshaping religious activities and student involvement.

### **Covid-19 and the Digital Turn in Faith-Based Student Associations**

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on social, political, and economic spheres, and Africa's university campuses were no exception.<sup>99</sup> Faith-based and student organisations acutely felt the repercussions. In Niger, for example, the closure of Abdou Moumouni University's campus mosque as part of preventive measures sparked vehement reactions from Muslim students.<sup>100</sup> Likewise, student organisations in Benin and Togo grappled with various restrictions. Benin imposed a '*cordon sanitaire*' for several months, severely limiting travel between communes. The closure of bars, places of worship, and entertainment venues, coupled with restrictions on gatherings exceeding 50 people, severely hampered normal activities. RAJEC leaders observed a decline in student engagement during this period, particularly among less involved members, with many having lost interest upon resumption of activities.<sup>101</sup> In Togo, most organisations, including AEEMT, suspended their primary activities due to the closure of educational institutions and a ban on gatherings of more than 15 people. Major events such as the National Islamic Training Seminar and the National Holy Qur'an Recitation Competition

---

<sup>98</sup> Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

<sup>99</sup> Arndt, Yacouba, Lawanson, Msindo and Simatei 2023.

<sup>100</sup> Bello Adamou and Oumarou 2023.

<sup>101</sup> Emile Eteka, Elvis Vitoule and Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

were cancelled in 2020, with the 2021 edition occurring at a much-reduced scale.<sup>102</sup> The current Amir of AEEMT reflected on the nearly two-year hiatus in major activities, noting a 'loosening up at the grassroots level.'<sup>103</sup>

The Covid-19 pandemic catalysed a transformative shift in how religious associations across faiths utilised digital technology. As previously discussed, many current and former activists have voiced concerns about social media's negative influence, citing the sway of influencers, the rise of cybercrime, and a perceived erosion of religious values. Notwithstanding these concerns, social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for mobilisation, organisation, and community building. During the pandemic, numerous faith-based student groups adeptly leveraged these platforms to extend their reach, coordinate activities, and maintain member connections. This swift adaptation led to a 'deterritorialisation' of religious activities, transitioning them from physical to virtual spaces. Using platforms such as Zoom for meetings, webinars for fraternal exchanges and prayers, Facebook for live broadcasts, and WhatsApp for discussion groups, these organisations not only maintained but often expanded their engagement despite physical distancing measures. A prime example of this digital pivot is the AEEMT's initiative to stream Friday sermons from both the campus mosque and other mosques in Lomé on its YouTube channel, which has over 5,500 subscribers,<sup>104</sup> and on their TikTok page, which has 4,000 followers.<sup>105</sup>

Similarly, in 2022, GBUST initiated '*Un Nouveau Regard*' (A New Look), a series of video capsules on Facebook, responding to the increasing prevalence of social media among youth and the lingering constraints on face-to-face interactions.<sup>106</sup> This online series, produced and hosted by Bible Group students at the University of Lomé, offers biblically informed perspectives on current global affairs. By addressing topics such as love, gender, development, and freedom, *Un Nouveau Regard* encourages students to view contemporary issues through a fresh, scriptural lens. GBUST and AEEMT's digital strategies have proven crucial in maintaining community links, underscoring religious groups' resilience and adaptability amidst pandemic challenges.

However, the shift to digital technology, while beneficial during lockdowns, has subsequently impacted physical participation in faith-based student associations. This impact is reflected in membership numbers and engagement patterns

<sup>102</sup> AEEMT, 'Journal du congrès - N° 2,' uploaded 1 January 2022.

<sup>103</sup> Aziz Gountante, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 5 August 2021.

<sup>104</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/c/aeemtofficel>.

<sup>105</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@aeemtofficel>.

<sup>106</sup> For example, see 'NOUVEAU REGARD N°16,' uploaded 20 March 2023.

across various groups. Pre-pandemic, GBUST reported 1,800 members nationwide, including 500–600 university students.<sup>107</sup> In 2020, GBEEB recorded 1,592 pupils and 441 university students actively engaged nationwide.<sup>108</sup> The University of Lomé boasted approximately ten JEC sections per faculty, each averaging 10–20 activists.<sup>109</sup> Whilst current precise figures are unavailable, these associations anticipate a decline in activist numbers. A RAJEC-Benin member observed that reliance on digital communication had ‘motivated the laziness of some people’ and diminished attendance at face-to-face meetings.<sup>110</sup> Reflecting on the past decade’s changes, a former JEC-U leader in Lomé highlighted a stark contrast in communication and engagement. A decade ago, the absence of smartphones necessitated more face-to-face interactions for collaborative activities. In contrast, today’s students gravitate towards virtual engagement, such as WhatsApp messaging, leading to decreased physical group participation.<sup>111</sup>

This digital transformation has undoubtedly reshaped the landscape of faith-based student associations. While it has enabled continued connection during challenging times, it has also altered the nature of community engagement, presenting both opportunities and challenges for these organisations moving forward. Beyond the challenges posed by technological shifts, these faith-based student groups face another significant hurdle: a stricter interpretation and application of *laïcité* on university campuses.

### **A Stricter Application of *Laïcité* on Campus?**

Recent years have witnessed a marked change in university authorities’ attitudes towards religious groups, particularly regarding access to campus facilities for activities. This change is especially pronounced in Benin, where activists from various faith-based associations reminisce about the 1990s and 2000s, when securing lecture halls or classrooms for events was considerably easier. A former ACEEMUB activist, now a professor at the University of Abomey-Calavi, experienced this transformation first-hand. Upon his return, he anticipated finding the multi-purpose hall that had once been a hub for cultural, sporting, and religious

---

<sup>107</sup> Armand Dzadu, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 12 August 2021.

<sup>108</sup> Hake Chabi Assa, Fabrice Hounkpevi and Angelo Klanclounon, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 March 2022.

<sup>109</sup> Wilfrid Abessan, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 17 November 2022.

<sup>110</sup> Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.

<sup>111</sup> Wilfrid Abessan, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 17 November 2022.

activities in the 1990s. To his dismay, he discovered the facility no longer existed on campus. Instead, he was informed of the presence of mosques in the vicinity of the university.<sup>112</sup>

The general secretary of GBEEB from 2009 to 2021 highlighted an incident in 2017 that exemplified this shift. When GBEEB requested permission to use the university's pitch for football matches during a cultural week, the COUS director rejected the application, citing the university's secular nature as grounds for denying space to religious groups. Even after appealing to Vice-Rector Maxime da Cruz, the request was denied. Da Cruz argued that the group's name, '*Groupe biblique universitaire*', conflicted with the university's commitment to *laïcité*. This incident, according to the GBEEB leader, reflects a broader national trend towards reinforcing *laïcité* in the public sphere.<sup>113</sup> For instance, in January 2017, in an effort to clean up public spaces in Cotonou, the Beninese government prohibited their use for religious events in the name of *laïcité*.<sup>114</sup> More recently, in 2022, the government introduced noise pollution measures, including regulations for places of worship. President Talon engaged with Muslim and Christian leaders to discuss new rules governing church bells, amplifiers, and muezzin calls, with non-compliance penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment.<sup>115</sup> These developments have significantly impacted campus activities, making it increasingly challenging for religious groups to secure venues for conferences or Bible studies.<sup>116</sup>

Catholic students at the University of Abomey-Calavi grapple with unique challenges amidst a stricter interpretation of *laïcité*. While they benefit from access to off-campus facilities like the chapel and Saint Dominique monastery in Cotonou, their on-campus situation has become increasingly precarious. The implementation of *laïcité* varies with each rectorate, each rector harbouring distinct concerns. Some fear that permitting the JEC to use classrooms might set a precedent, inviting similar requests from other religious groups. Historically, Catholic students occasionally secured classrooms through personal connections with Catholic university authorities or deans. More frequently, however, they congregate in less formal spaces: campus courtyards, beneath trees, on grassy areas, or in makeshift venues like the straw huts ('*paillottes*') of the *École Polytechnique d'Abomey-Calavi* (EPAC)<sup>117</sup> or the university restaurant. The off-campus university chapel, while

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

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

114 Madore 2022a, 10–11.

115 Domingo, 'Lutte contre la pollution sonore...', *Le Béninois Libéré*, 17 February 2023; 'Patrice Talon rencontre les responsables...', *Les Pharaons*, 17 February 2023.

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

117 Located on the campus of Abomey-Calavi.

available, poses accessibility challenges.<sup>118</sup> The UAC campus chaplain shared a telling incident. Despite obtaining permission from the *École Nationale d'Économie Appliquée et de Management* (National School of Applied Economics and Management, ENEAM) director for Catholic meetings, his assistant, clad in a Dominican habit, was denied entry due to the religious attire. The chaplain perceives Catholics as being particularly targeted, facing the most significant obstacles on campus. He attributes this to a perceived notion among authorities that 'Catholics are too powerful' and need to be 'broken'.<sup>119</sup>

Various religious groups at UAC perceive an imbalance in the application of *laïcité*, particularly between Christians and Muslims. Over the past decade, Beninese Muslims have increasingly voiced concerns about religious discrimination and perceived state favouritism towards Christianity. This issue came to the fore in 2014 during a working session titled 'Islam and the practice of *laïcité* in Benin', at which Muslim representatives advocated for more equitable treatment of religions by the state.<sup>120</sup> These concerns were further exacerbated in November 2022 when the *École Nationale d'Administration et de Magistrature* (National School of Administration and Magistracy, ENAM) and several educational institutions banned headscarves.<sup>121</sup>

Conversely, some Christians at UAC argue that Muslims enjoy privileged access to worship spaces, citing the 'Gaddafi' amphitheatre in the ILACI building. However, this perspective overlooks the challenges faced by Muslim students, exemplified by the recent renovation of the ACEEMUB mosque on the campus outskirts. During the renovation, which took place between 2018 and 2022,<sup>122</sup> Muslim students were compelled to attend other nearby mosques for Friday prayers. In 2018, ACEEMUB officials were forced to close the Umar Ibn Khattab Mosque due to structural deterioration.<sup>123</sup> The new mosque, funded by NGO OHEI-Bénin and Saudi donors, now includes a conference room.<sup>124</sup>

---

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

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

120 'Procès verbal de réunion du comité mixte gouvernement-communauté musulmane d'organisation du séminaire bilan sur 'l'islam et la pratique de la laïcité au Bénin,' 2014, accessed 27 June 2024.

121 Igue, 'Port de voile en Islam...', *Fraternité*, 30 November 2022.

122 Moko, 'La mosquée Oumar,' accessed 27 June 2024.

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

124 Oyèyèmi, 'Construction du nouveau siège de l'ACEEMUB: après un an d'attente, la délégation saoudienne se dit prête,' accessed 27 June 2024; Oyèyèmi 2019; 'Construction de la mosquée Oumar bin Khattob (siège de l'Aceemub),' accessed 27 June 2024.



**Fig. 15:** ACEEMUB Mosque under construction, 16 March 2022, photo by the author.

The University of Lomé presents a contrasting scenario to the Université d'Abomey-Calavi, with on-campus places of worship significantly facilitating activities for groups like JEC and AEEMT. A former JEC-U leader, reflecting on his 2017–19 tenure, noted a generally positive relationship with university authorities. JEC-U's consistent access to the CCU for activities was a notable advantage. Their official recognition meant that organising events usually required only a simple letter to the university. Many university officials, familiar with JEC-U and attending the university parish church, contributed to this amicable relationship. However, a policy shift in his second year saw the university cease allocating classrooms and amphitheatres to any association, religious or otherwise.<sup>125</sup> According to the University Parish moderator, there are plans to modernise the CCU on campus to make it more attractive to students. He noted that the CCU's prominence has diminished in light of the recent modernisation of the campus. Previously, when the campus was less developed, the CCU stood out, but has since lost its relative attractiveness. The CCU's modernisation faces funding challenges and bureaucratic hurdles, as the site, on

<sup>125</sup> Raymond Sedoufio, in conversation with the author, Google Meet call, 10 November 2022.

loan from the university, lacks official documentation, necessitating permits for any renovation work.<sup>126</sup>

While the presence of the CCU and mosque at UL benefits their respective groups, it has sparked discontent among other religious organisations seeking their own designated spaces. The Adventist Student Youth of Togo (JEAT), for instance, has struggled to secure a worship space despite submitting formal requests and building plans. Initially using a building near Cité B, JEAT was displaced by renovations, resorting to outdoor meetings. Their attempts to establish a campus church were thwarted by unexpected land purchase requirements, financial constraints, and leadership changes at the university.<sup>127</sup>

GBUST leaders face similar challenges. The current secretary general contrasts the ease of organising large events in the 2000s with the present difficulties. Previously, GBUST could host gatherings of 200–300 people in lecture halls, particularly during lunch hours. Now, tighter schedules and classroom shortages have made securing such spaces increasingly challenging, even when offering payment.<sup>128</sup> GBUST's January 2013 activity report at the University of Lomé highlighted growing challenges in securing meeting spaces over the preceding two years. A major obstacle was the rescheduling of available amphitheatres, severely limiting the organisation of large group gatherings. The situation was exacerbated by the announced renovation of South Campus residences, resulting in the loss of access to the Protestant Chaplaincy's meeting room – a modest space that had accommodated up to 60 people. These constraints compelled the association to adapt, shifting its focus towards cultivating smaller, localised cells within various faculties.<sup>129</sup>

By 2018, the Bible Group president at UL noted a marked decrease in the university's receptiveness to GBUST. This shift led to a fragmented experience for members, dispersed across different cells without a central meeting place. Improvised venues became the norm, with students resorting to stone blocks or sitting on cloth-covered floors. This lack of a dedicated space has significantly impacted member cohesion and familiarity. To counter these challenges, GBUST initiated fundraising efforts to acquire land near the university to establish a GBU house as a central meeting point that would enhance the group's capacity to reach and influence a broader student population.<sup>130</sup> In response to the university's restrictions on large lecture hall gatherings, GBUST has pivoted its strategy. The focus has shifted

---

<sup>126</sup> Marc Folivi, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 1 September 2021.

<sup>127</sup> Valdo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

<sup>128</sup> Armand Dzadu, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 12 August 2021.

<sup>129</sup> 'Le Nouveau Repère,' January 2013, accessed 27 June 2024.

<sup>130</sup> Ezian-Gnamavo, 'Poussé vers la sortie mais encore plus présent,' accessed 10 August 2022.

to smaller cells of five or six students convening on campus benches for Bible study. This approach aligns with GBUST's adaptive philosophy: 'We cannot refuse six students who have a student card to sit on a bench and discuss.'<sup>131</sup> Larger activities, such as monthly general meetings, are now conducted off-campus.



**Fig. 16:** Benches near the Library at the University of Lomé, 13 September 2021, photo by the author.

The GBUST leader attributes these challenges to what he terms a 'misinterpreted *laïcité*'. He contends that rather than fostering 'diversity', it is 'interpreted as the exclusion of all that is religious'. Despite GBUST's official recognition, he perceives mere tolerance from university authorities: 'They don't make life easy for you because they have the image that you are bringing the church into the university.' He frames this as a distinctly 'francophone problem', drawing a stark contrast with universities in Ghana and Nigeria, where Christian groups enjoy dedicated chaplains and on-campus chapels. This disparity is particularly galling for GBUST members, given that Catholics and Muslims maintain their places of worship on campus. The GBUST leader posits that these groups' influence has secured their

<sup>131</sup> Armand Dzadu, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 12 August 2021.



worship spaces: ‘It’s because Catholics and Muslims are so influential that they have managed to have a place of worship.’<sup>132</sup>

The GBEEB on the Abomey-Calavi campus faces similar hurdles. Current challenges stem from tightly scheduled classes and limited room availability, with classrooms frequently at capacity. This leaves scant space for extracurricular activities like those offered by GBEEB. Their requests for space are sometimes met with resistance, justified on the grounds of upholding *laïcité*.<sup>133</sup> Consequently, they have resorted to informal gatherings, often convening under trees on campus. The students, dedicated to their Bible studies and activities, have shown resourcefulness by using bricks to create makeshift seating and adapting to open spaces for their meetings.



**Fig. 17:** Jardin U (University of Abomey-Calavi), 5 March 2022, photo by the author.

<sup>132</sup> Armand Dzadu, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 12 August 2021.

<sup>133</sup> Hake Chabi Assa, Fabrice Hounkpevi and Angelo Klanclounon, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 March 2022.

The increasingly restrictive stance of university authorities in Abomey-Calavi has compelled faith-based student associations to relocate their activities off-campus. Since 2004, GBEEB has operated from its national headquarters in Agblangandan, Sèmè-Kpodji commune, more than 20 km from the Abomey-Calavi campus.<sup>134</sup> This geographical shift has prompted GBEEB leaders to consider establishing reading and meeting centres in various towns across the country, beyond the confines of educational institutions, where conducting activities has become challenging. These proposed centres are envisioned as multifunctional spaces addressing broader social needs. By providing essential resources such as computers and internet access, they aim to support students lacking such facilities. The plan involves constructing these centres either on or near campuses, offering students a conducive environment for their activities. GBEEB leaders emphasise the urgency of this initiative, citing the currently inadequate conditions, in which students often resort to studying the Bible under trees.<sup>135</sup>

Both GBUST and GBEEB have adopted strategic approaches to enhance their influence within the university community. GBUST explicitly aims to 'impact the university' by encouraging alumni with professorial or administrative positions to exert influence. This strategy bore fruit in 2021 when a GBUST member secured a position in the Presidency of the University of Lomé.<sup>136</sup> GBEEB has pursued a similar path. The former general secretary sought to unify Protestant professors at the University of Abomey-Calavi to counter the perceived marginalisation of Christians and address the administration's reluctance to meet their needs. This initiative yielded tangible results, with one professor offering his laboratory for GBEEB activities and others providing their offices for strategic meetings.<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, GBEEB has attempted to extend its influence to student unions. This candid reflection reveals both the successes and challenges of GBEEB's efforts to shape student politics:

What we have managed to do is to try and get some of our students into union offices. [...] When we have elections, we encourage students who are brilliant to get on the lists. So when they get elected, we call them and advise them on the position they should take. So sometimes they follow us. Sometimes they don't. [laughs] So we managed to do that for a few years, but

<sup>134</sup> Jacob Djossou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 19 March 2022.

<sup>135</sup> Hake Chabi Assa, Fabrice Houngkpevi and Angelo Klanclounon, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 March 2022.

<sup>136</sup> Armand Dzađu, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 12 August 2021.

<sup>137</sup> Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

now it's become high politics. So it's hard to get our students on the electoral lists [...] You can't control them anymore.<sup>138</sup>

The narratives of decline presented by former activists, while reflecting real changes in student engagement, fail to fully capture the complex dynamics at play. Rather than a simple decline, we observe a transformation of faith-based student activism in response to a changing societal and academic landscape. Factors such as stricter enforcement of *laïcité*, financial constraints, evolving student demographics, and the digital revolution have reshaped how students engage with religious organisations and express their faith on campus. While traditional forms of participation have decreased, new modes of engagement have emerged, particularly in digital spaces. This perceived decline may partly reflect the natural evolution of these movements as they mature and adapt to new realities. Crucially, while organised religion on campus may be experiencing a downturn, the importance of faith remains high for many Christian and Muslim students. Religious identity often transcends organised structures, manifesting in personal, individual forms not immediately visible in organised contexts. An increasing focus on individualism, fuelled by neoliberal ideology, has also contributed to this transformation. This evolution reflects wider socio-political changes and signals a need to reassess the influence of faith-based student groups. It is therefore more accurate to speak of a reconfiguration of faith-based student activism rather than an outright decline. As these organisations navigate this new terrain, they must redefine their relevance by embracing and adapting to these new realities.

---

138 Ibid.

