

## Conclusion: A History of Resilience, Adaptation, and Community

This book unveils the journey of Christian and Muslim student associations in Benin and Togo, demonstrating how they have not merely endured but flourished in the face of authoritarian regimes, *laïcité*, and socio-economic upheaval. These faith-based groups have profoundly reshaped student activism and redefined religion's role at public universities since their emergence at the University of Abomey-Calavi and the University of Lomé in the 1970s. Their growth, amidst environments initially dominated by secular, anti-imperialist, and pan-Africanist ideologies, speaks to their resilience and adaptability. Central to their success are the innovative 'social curricula' they have developed, integrating academic knowledge with spiritual and moral growth. This holistic approach has become increasingly vital in an era marked by massification and graduate unemployment, offering students not only practical preparation for post-university challenges but also a framework for conceptualising and pursuing the good life in contemporary African societies. By providing alternative pathways to fulfilment and success, these associations help students reconcile global aspirations with local realities. This comprehensive model challenges the secular intellectual traditions of these universities, deeply rooted in Western academic paradigms, and necessitates a re-evaluation of religious expression within the context of *laïcité* and religious pluralism.

By examining both Christian and Muslim student associations over five decades, this book has offered a novel perspective on the interplay between religion, politics, and education in West Africa. The parallel developments in Benin and Togo provide a compelling comparative case study, shedding light on how faith-based student associations navigate the matrix of religion, culture, and politics within academic environments. This approach not only enhances our understanding of religion's role in public universities but also highlights the importance of translocal factors in shaping group dynamics and the changing function of universities amidst increasing enrolments and rising graduate unemployment.

Higher education in Benin and Togo emerged in the 1960s with the creation of the *Institut d'Enseignement Supérieur du Bénin*, symbolising colonial emancipation and nation-building. The establishment of national universities in 1970 marked an important step towards independence. However, the early years of the University of Abomey-Calavi and the University of Lomé were characterised by political turmoil and authoritarian rule. Both Kérékou's regime in Benin and Eyadéma's in Togo imposed strict controls on religious practices and sought to channel student associations into unified party structures. While Eyadéma successfully suppressed

protests at the UL, the UAC became a focal point of resistance to Kérékou's authoritarianism.

During this period, faith-based student groups demonstrated remarkable adaptability in navigating these authoritarian landscapes. Unlike state-aligned student unions, Christian and Muslim associations carved out a unique activist path, advocating for moral autonomy and addressing educational challenges. They served as vital intermediaries between students, administrators, and the state, balancing civic engagement with political neutrality. These groups transformed into spiritual refuges and platforms for resilience, offering practical support and alternative visions of the good life that transcended the material constraints and political pressures of their time. The construction of places of worship on the Lomé campus, with the backing of national religious figures, exemplified their ability to foster positive university relations. Notably, leaders of these associations maintained an apolitical stance, crucial for navigating the complex educational and political landscape of the time.

Recent jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel and attacks in northern Benin and Togo have heightened security concerns in the Gulf of Guinea region. This has led to increased surveillance of Muslim communities, affecting religious coexistence and political freedoms.<sup>1</sup> Muslim student organisations, such as the *Association des Élèves et Étudiants Musulmans au Togo* (AEEMT), have faced scrutiny,<sup>2</sup> while institutions like the *Institut de Langue Arabe et de la Culture Islamique* (ILACI) at UAC have encountered financial difficulties<sup>3</sup> and suspicions of extremist links.<sup>4</sup> In response to these challenges, Christian and Islamic student associations at both universities have increasingly collaborated to address issues of violent extremism. The *Jeunesse Étudiante Catholique* (JEC) and AEEMT have organised seminars and workshops on these topics,<sup>5</sup> demonstrating a commitment to interfaith cooperation in tackling societal problems. This proactive approach extends to initiatives like ACEEMUB's focus on cybercrime and terrorism, reflecting a shared belief in youth engagement for social development.<sup>6</sup>

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1 Madore 2022b.

2 Ikilil Adjama, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 17 August 2021.

3 Badarou, 'Conséquences de la crise libyenne...', *Matin Libre*, 22 October 2019; Lidehou, 'Université Abomey-Calavi: Direct-Aid Bénin fait don de matériels et équipements didactiques,' accessed 14 March 2023.

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

5 Ayetan, 'Togo: des activités socio-éducatives...', *La Croix Africa*, 29 July 2022; 'Extrémisme violent et Cybersécurité au Togo,' accessed 27 June 2024; 'Lutte contre l'extrémisme violent...', *ATOP*, 7 August 2023.

6 '11e congrès ordinaire de l'ACEEMUB...', *Matin Libre*, 21 July 2023.

Importantly, this book's findings contrast with the recent, dominant focus on religious radicalism. They highlight the largely peaceful coexistence of faith communities on university campuses, characterised by mutual influence rather than conflict or aggressive proselytising. The principle of *laïcité*, while central to managing religious dynamics and widely supported by students, faces challenges in its application, particularly in ensuring equitable treatment of different religious groups. The implementation of *laïcité* varies significantly between the UAC and the UL, reflecting broader challenges in balancing religious freedom with secular academic principles. At UAC, a strict policy prohibits allocating space to religious groups, inadvertently highlighting inequalities and sparking debates about the nature of *laïcité*. In contrast, UL initially adopted a more inclusive approach, providing designated worship spaces for Catholics and Muslims. However, recent resource constraints have led to restrictions, forcing religious groups to seek alternative meeting places. This situation reflects a broader reassessment of university spaces as sites of both secular and religious interaction. The renewed visibility of endogenous religions, such as Vodun in Benin, alongside state promotion, further complicates adherence to secular principles. This shift raises questions about the role of universities in decolonisation and Africanisation of education, potentially moving towards more culturally integrated identities.

The dynamics of majority versus minority religious status add another layer of complexity. Muslim student associations, while typically less politically scrutinised than the Catholic Church, face unique challenges in the context of recent regional jihadist threats. Their efforts to counter prejudice and create an environment in which Islamic identity and secular academic values coexist underscore the ongoing negotiation between religious identity and secularism. This situation underlines the need for a fair implementation of *laïcité* that recognises and supports the diverse religious communities within these academic settings.

The university campuses in Benin and Togo serve as microcosms reflecting broader national, religious, and societal trends. The political liberalisation and expanded religious freedoms of the 1990s heightened the visibility and influence of faith in public life, marking a transformative era that extended to campus religiosity. These universities not only mirror societal changes but also actively shape them, influencing schools and colleges as students strategically train future activists. Despite occasional tensions, such as those between university and parish-based JEC groups, constructive engagement persists. This is evident in outreach efforts during strikes and the consolidation of local Muslim student associations into national bodies. The 1990s witnessed a reconfiguration of religious authority and identity formation, particularly visible in the dynamics between campus-based and parish/church-based associations. These developments illustrate universities' roles as sites of religious experimentation and contestation, where students navi-

gate the complexities of academic demands, religious expectations, and personal autonomy in their quest for the good life. Such elite dynamics have the potential to reshape not only the wider religious landscape but also the relationship between religious groups, educational institutions, and society at large.

This study also reveals the significance of translocal and transnational forces in shaping student activism and religiosity. The early 1970s saw student mobility across Central and West Africa spark the creation of evangelical student associations. Partnerships between Muslim student associations and transnational Islamic NGOs further exemplify this dynamic. The phenomenon of 'AEEMisation' in Francophone West Africa demonstrates the fusion of Islamic student activism across educational levels. Collaborations with global organisations, such as the International Young Catholic Students, the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, and the *Organisation de la Jeunesse Musulmane en Afrique de l'Ouest*, strengthened the regional and international presence of student religious groups in Lomé and Abomey-Calavi, highlighting the interplay between local and global factors in campus religious life.

In recent decades, faith-based student associations have offered a comprehensive social curriculum. Amidst student union conflicts, campus violence, and challenges posed by the LMD system, these groups have provided important support and mediation. Responding to the growing crisis of graduate employability, they have shifted focus to entrepreneurship and job market skills. By creating environments of belonging that facilitate friendships, support networks, and even marriages, these associations demonstrate their adaptability to members' changing needs. Their social curricula, combining academic goals with moral guidance and community support, enrich the university experience and showcase the multifaceted role of faith-based organisations in shaping students' lives and addressing their challenges. This holistic approach offers students a framework for conceptualising and pursuing the good life amidst uncertainty and limited economic opportunity.

The 'entrepreneurial turn' in faith-based student associations' social curricula reflects evolving concepts of religious activism and subjectivity among African students. By focusing on practical skills, business incubation, and leadership training, these groups are redefining their relevance in response to socio-economic challenges in liberalised, development-oriented societies. This approach aligns with broader trends in African Christianity, such as neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel, while finding parallels in Muslim student activism. As these associations position themselves as incubators of responsible citizens and economic drivers, they reshape religion's public role and students' aspirations, offering alternative pathways to the good life that balance material success with spiritual and ethical considerations.

The lasting impact of these associations is evident in their alumni's societal roles. Skills and values developed during student years have propelled many into leadership positions across political, administrative, and religious spheres. This narrative underscores the social curricula's multifaceted value in producing leaders adept at navigating both secular and religious landscapes. Networks like the *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes*, *Amicale des Intellectuels Musulmans du Bénin*, and *Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo* demonstrate sustained religious activism beyond university. While Christian alumni often align with their bishops' conference, Muslim intellectuals take a more proactive approach in influencing their community's leadership, illustrating diverse strategies in shaping public discourse and religious governance.

In recent years, faith-based student activism has undergone a significant transformation, marked by declining engagement due to generational shifts, the pervasive influence of social media, and evolving student priorities. The once-vibrant student associations now face dwindling active participation, reflecting broader socio-economic and cultural changes affecting campus life. As academic pursuits increasingly take precedence over extracurricular activities, the landscape of campus activism has altered dramatically. Former activists argue that younger students, lured by social media's promise of instant gratification, prioritise wealth and fame over traditional forms of volunteerism. This shift has undermined long-standing perceptions of altruism, particularly in the face of economic uncertainty. Moreover, student activism now contends with competition from neighbourhood and parish groups, a challenge further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While digital technologies have helped maintain some level of engagement, they have simultaneously reduced physical participation, signalling a profound shift in community activism.

The evolving religious landscape on these university campuses demands a deeper exploration beyond the apparent decline of structured religious activism. This shift points towards a more sophisticated understanding of religiosity that transcends the confines of formal groups. While the lens of the 'bureaucratisation' of religion provides a valuable framework for examining organised religious associations, it risks overlooking the diverse, 'unorganised' expressions of faith flourishing among students. The rise of social media, demographic shifts, and economic pressures have fundamentally altered the nature of religiosity, favouring personal spiritual journeys over traditional forms of activism. The experiences of Muslim and Christian students, who may identify with their faith in ways not strictly tied to group participation, highlight the complexity of religious expression in this new context. Furthermore, the recent enforcement of dress codes by student unions and university administrations in Benin and Togo, ostensibly aimed at preserving morality and traditional values, indicates a convergence of secular and religious

activism. These efforts to shape a morally aware future elite reflect a broader societal trend of incorporating religious principles into university life, demonstrating the enduring relevance of faith in shaping student identity and educational ethos.

This study of faith-based student associations in Benin and Togo offers broader insights into the role of religion in higher education across Africa and beyond. By chronicling the history of Christian and Muslim student groups at the Universities of Abomey-Calavi and Lomé, this book has illuminated a neglected aspect of West African higher education and provided important perspectives on the evolving relationship between faith, education, and societal change in postcolonial Africa. Far from being marginal, these associations have been instrumental in shaping the academic, social, and political landscapes of their campuses and beyond. Their resilience and adaptability demonstrate how religious groups can effectively navigate and influence secular institutions in diverse contexts. These organisations embody a history of community building that continues to influence the region's trajectory, fostering social cohesion, providing vital support networks, and nurturing future leaders in challenging socio-economic environments.

Ultimately, this study underscores the dynamic role of religion in public life, challenging simplistic notions of secularisation and highlighting the ongoing negotiation between religious identity and civic engagement in contemporary African societies. It reveals how faith-based activism on university campuses reflects and shapes broader societal transformations, offering a unique lens through which to understand the interplay of religion, education, and social change in the postcolonial era. Through these associations, students actively construct and pursue their visions of the good life, reconciling global aspirations with local realities and redefining success in ways that encompass both personal fulfilment and social transformation.