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# The Political Economy of Civil Islam in Côte d'Ivoire

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## 1. Introduction

Under the long presidency of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the “Father” of the Ivorian nation and devout builder of one the world’s largest Christian edifices – the Roman Catholic basilica of Our Lady of Peace of Yamoussoukro, modeled on Saint Peter of Rome – Côte d’Ivoire’s prevalent public image at home and abroad was that of a composite stronghold of Christianity, traditional African religions, and new prophetic cults, while Islam was of secondary importance. Echoing French colonial perceptions, Islam was relegated to folkloric and traditional roles in the northern savanna and to the private spheres of disparate local communities of migrants and traders in the more fertile and economically dynamic South. Since 1994, Houphouët’s successors’ ethnonationalist politics of *ivoirité* (“Ivoirianness”) have contributed to reinforce this public image. Islam has been presented as a religion of foreigners and the Dioula and other groups originating from the North as citizens of doubtful or circumstantial Ivorian pedigree. The protestantization of power following the election of Laurent Gbagbo in 2000, celebrated by Evangelicals as the first “Christian” president of the country, and a pro-government media-relayed anti-Islamic campaign in the immediate aftermath of the breakout of the civil war in September 2002 both seemed to confirm the ongoing marginalization of Islam and Muslims in contemporary Côte d’Ivoire.

Though the old perceptions are not without historical foundation, the new political ideologies are clearly distorting changing realities. In the second half of the 20th century, Islam has slowly but consistently gained ground in all regions and most ethnic and social groups of the country, to the point where it has now become Côte d’Ivoire’s first religion from a demographic standpoint. Since the creation of the *Conseil National Islamique* (National Islamic Council or CNI) in 1993, the overarching Islamic federation which is a culmination of two decades of grassroots activism by an ever-expanding elite of modernist-minded reformists, Ivorian Muslims are less divided, better organized and more vocal in the national public sphere than ever before. Throughout the country, including in the main cities of the South such as Abidjan, Muslims assert their religious identity openly; the civil war has not altered this inclination. Whereas twenty to thirty years ago it

was almost unconceivable for civil servants to wear the *boubou* (the traditional Muslim gown) at work on Fridays, today it is *bon ton* to do so. Islam has in fact become a well-established national religion, tuned into the modern world's global challenges and the local realities of the plural Ivorian landscape.

This chapter surveys the historical genesis and contemporary significance of these broad Islamic transformations. It examines the changing fabric of Muslim leadership and society as well as some emerging new interpretations of Islam. Specifically, it questions the interface between Islam and politics, understood as the confluence of the State, civil society and the public sphere. Against portrayals of Islam as inherently anti-pluralist and undemocratic, it shows that Côte d'Ivoire's Islamic reform movement has repudiated the goal of an Islamic state, mobilized religiously ecumenical support, promoted women's rights, and championed republican and secular ideals. Ending with the civil war, it concludes that the present conflict is not even remotely a religious one and that Muslim civic organizations, along with other religious and secular actors, are indispensable partners to reestablish the State's legitimacy and rebuild a more peaceful society.

## **2. A Pluralistic Religious Context<sup>1</sup>**

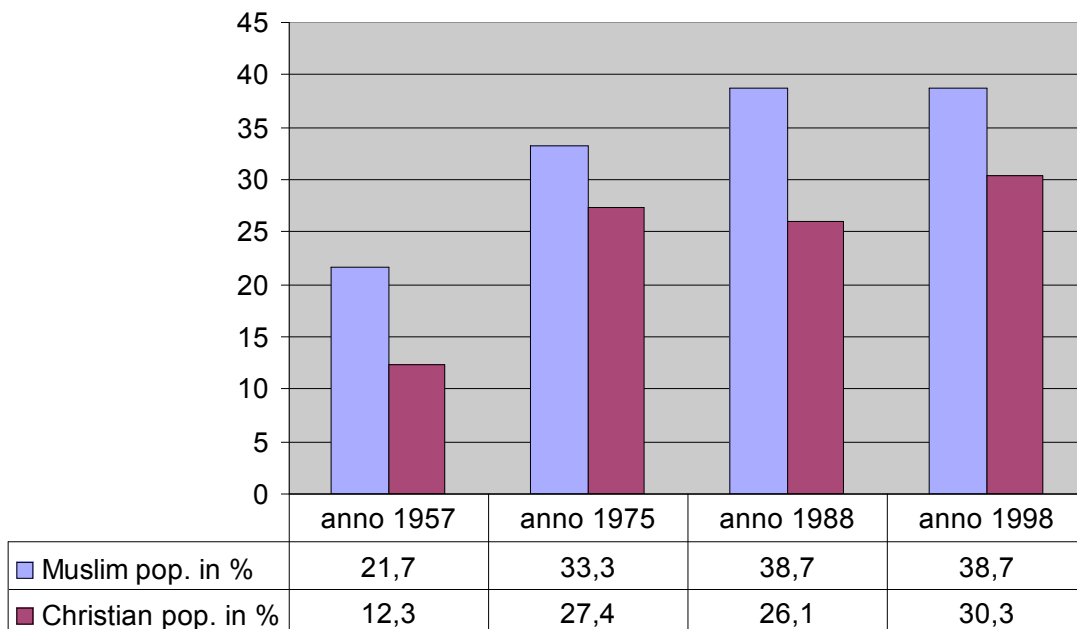
### *2.1. Of Islamization and religious demography*

Post-independence Côte d'Ivoire has witnessed one of the fastest growths of Islam anywhere on the African continent. But although no one contests the progress of the Quranic prophecy, its magnitude has been quantified variably. Tied to birth rates but also to international migrations and conversions, this progression is undoubtedly difficult to measure: new converts, for instance, tend to keep their ethnic names and often go unnoticed as Muslims. Yet the disparity in the statistical data is mostly a matter of partisan extrapolations. Many Muslim and non-Muslim observers argue that Christian and governmental figures minimize the proportion of the Muslim population nationwide, possibly because of a conscious or passive mental framework whereby Christianity is a vigorous tradition having a special influence on the political culture of the State. The politics at stake in religious statistics are nowhere better illustrated than in two official reports written by the *Institut National de la Statistique* (National Statistical Institute or INS) and the *Conseil économique et social* (Economic and Social Council or CES) in the heat of the *ivoirité* polemic.<sup>2</sup> Both suggest that Islam was no longer the first religion when referred exclusively to the population of Ivorian nationals. The progress of Islam in the country thus supposedly only resulted from the influx of Muslim foreigners from northern neighboring countries, a phenomenon presented as a threat to the nation's religious balance and ultimate unity and harmony. As the sociologist Moriba Touré demonstrated<sup>3</sup>, this rhetoric was mere xenophobia, if only because though it is an established fact that over

70% of foreign residents are Muslim, Islamization did not slow down like immigration rates did after the economic crisis of the early 1980s.

Be it as it may, the three official censuses of 1975, 1988 and 1998 record the increasing importance of Islam in the Ivorian religious landscape – one of the reasons why Islamic organizations have not challenged the State on this issue, as happened in 2001-02 in neighboring Ghana. Representing an estimated 21.7% of the total population in 1957, the Muslim ratio increased to 33.25% in 1975, 38.7% in 1988 and 38.7% in 1998 (or 43% according to the INS intermediary survey of 1996).<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the Christian population also grew from 12.3% in 1957 to 27.4% in 1975, 26.1% in 1988 and 30.3% in 1998 (or 33% according to the INS report). Indeed, monotheism’s dynamism in an age of rapid urbanization is a defining feature of the religious history of modern Côte d’Ivoire.

**Ivorian religious landscape 1957-1998**



Islamization brought about a shift in the Muslim population’s status, from minority to quasi-majority. This decisive enlargement of scale is the context in which Islam and Muslims have become more visible and enterprising in the national public sphere. What is more, it has redrawn the country’s religious map. The Muslim presence has expanded to the entire Ivorian territory, including the South. Whereas in the colonial period Islam spread to the forest regions through the almost exclusive agency of migration (the new cities of the developing South

were swelled by Dioula traders and other Muslim workers), in the post-independence era, more and more rural and urban southern autochthons have also converted to Islam. There are now Muslims in various proportions in most Ivorian ethnic groups, including the Agni, the Baoulé or the Bété. It is therefore a misrepresentation to refer to the country's internal ecological frontier as a divide between a predominantly Muslim North and a predominantly Christian South, as has been done by some Ivorian and Western media after September 2002.<sup>5</sup> According to the 1998 census, Muslims outnumber Christians (but not Christians and other religious groups taken together) in most administrative regions of the "global South". In the North, Evangelicals and to a lesser extent Catholics have also pushed the Christian frontier, even though the Savanna remains predominantly Muslim. Contrary to popular conceptions, more Muslims live in the South than in the North and Muslim concentration is the greatest in Abidjan (41% of the 2.7 millions Abidjanese were Muslim in 1998). Mirroring the country's politico-economic centralism, Abidjan has also become Côte d'Ivoire's most influential Islamic center, supplanting Bouaké and the ancient strongholds of the northern region.

## 2.2. *Christian-Muslim relations*

In the Ivorian South, Muslims and Christians of various denominations – along with a variety of animists – have coexisted peacefully for as long as four generations and sometimes more. Families with members belonging to both religions are not uncommon. Until at least the early 2000s, neighbors socialized regardless of their faith (exchanging Christmas or *Tabaski* wishes and dishes), buyers and sellers bargained in Dioula (the *lingua franca* of Ivorian markets, spoken by many non-Muslims), and most schoolchildren attended the same secular public schools (and sometimes Catholic ones as well). Houphouët-Boigny's ideology of ecumenical harmony between the country's religious traditions, though political at core as an instrument of co-optation to achieve national cohesion where no religion dominated single-handedly, further strengthened this state of affairs. Kouassi-Datékré, a village in the East where Muslims and Christians helped each other build their religious centers, has long been heralded a symbol of Côte d'Ivoire's "religious miracle". Not that there was not any resentment on either side. Since the colonial era and with renewed acuteness since the *ivoirité* crisis, Christians nurtured a besieged complex whereby Islam was portrayed as a steamroller religion of invaders. Convinced that the colonial and postcolonial regimes favored Christianity at their expense, Muslims conversely developed a victimization complex. But if there were instances of social conflict involving members of both faiths, they were never ascribed to religion. This explains why the politically motivated attacks on mosques and imams and to a lesser extent on churches and priests after

October 2000 and again after September 2002 truly shocked and saddened many Ivorians. Contacts between imams and priests have continued anyhow.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, there have been various experiences of inter-faith dialogue since the 1970s. Initiated by the Catholic Church upon the recommendations of the 1965 Second Vatican Council, these meetings concerned only a small elite of mostly urban European priests and laymen as well as young Muslim reformists, determined to inscribe the spirit of tolerance and social peace on the heart of their new interpretation of Islam. For their commitment to this dialogue, El Hadj Boubacar Sakho, a Muslim notability of Abidjan, was awarded a medal by Pope John Paul II in the mid-1990s and El Hadj Tidjane Ba, Côte d'Ivoire's first mufti who was both a very influential reformist and a Tidjani, was invited to the Assisi ecumenical prayer days by the same pope in 1986.<sup>7</sup> These irregular Christian-Muslim contacts were important in the long run in that the new emerging Muslim leadership was influenced by the social and intellectual *modus operandi* of the Church, especially with regards to the centralized mode of communal organization, strategies of communication, the use of the French language, techniques of missionary activity and social welfare activism.<sup>8</sup> In many ways, the *Conseil National Islamique* emulates for Islam the multifaceted role that the Church plays for Catholicism.

In 1995, the country's main Christian, Muslim and animist organizations also supported the initiative of a secular pro-democracy NGO called the *Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherches sur la Démocratie et le Développement Economique et Social en Côte d'Ivoire* (the Studies and Research Group on Democracy and Socio-Economic Development in Côte d'Ivoire or GERDDES-CI) by becoming founding members of a new *Forum des Confessions Religieuses* (Forum of Religious Bodies). Today led by Senior Evangelist Ediémou Blin Jacob of the Celestial Christian Church, the Forum has voiced religious leaders' appeasing messages at times of political conflict and carried out an increasingly important function since September 2002 (see details below).

### **3. Islam in the Legal Framework and Political Culture of the State**

#### *3.1. Egalitarian legal framework but more sectarian realities*

Following the French model, the Ivorian constitution, first adopted in 1960 and revised in August 2000, declares the Republic "one and indivisible, secular, democratic and social". As far as religions are concerned, all are recognized before the law and none can claim specific privileges from the State. Secular but not anti-religious, the State is committed to protect its citizens' religious freedom and the free exercise of all Ivorian cults. Until March 2003, the administrative agency in charge of religious affairs and the guarantor of these principles was the Interior Ministry, when a Cults Ministry was created by the Gbagbo regime to

foster national reconciliation. To this day, Muslims have not complained of any political infringements on their basic religious freedom, including the freedom to convert to Islam. There has never been any Islamic party nor have there been attempts to create one.

The differences between Ivorian and French conceptions of secularism are noteworthy, owing mostly to Houphouët's conviction that religions had a decisive role to play in the attainment of national unity and socioeconomic progress – a rhetoric taken up again by all of his successors. Profoundly spiritual, eager to be seen as a kind of prophet, Houphouët placed his rule under God's law. He advocated this divine tutelage not just in Christian but in broad ecumenical terms, in part to co-opt all religious parties. Muslims have always been laudatory supporters of this particular conception of State-religion relations. But their criticism of what they saw as the State's non-avowed bias in favor of Christianity grew sharply in the 1980s. Despite the building of some mosques, the completion of the Marian sanctuary, the Saint Paul Cathedral (both in Abidjan) and the Yamoussoukro basilica made the disproportion in financial investments between the country's main religions all too obvious. On these occasions, Houphouët orchestrated three visits of the Pope in less than ten years. Some observers also wondered if the creation of two new bishoprics in the almost entirely Islamized towns of Bondoukou and Odienné, respectively in 1988 and 1995, was not the sign of a political willingness to promote Christianity from above. Spokesman of Muslims' frustrations, the very influential reformist El Hadj Aboubacar Fofana asked in 1990: "Is the State still secular or it is choosing a religion?".<sup>9</sup> The democratic turmoil and the appointment of Alassane Dramane Ouattara as Prime Minister – the highest position ever reached until then by a Dioula and a (secular) Muslim – temporarily appeased those doubts. But critiques rose again after 1994 and became blatant denunciations under Gbagbo, who made it no secret that he was placing his rule under the law of Jesus Christ.

Constitutionally impartial as regards religions, the newly independent Ivorian State *de jure* favored egalitarianism in other ways as well. To harmonize the legal system – in the hope that it would accelerate the nation's modernization, a main target of the 1960s-70s development policies – a unified national positive law replaced the pre-existing customary and religious traditions, disregarded as burdens of the past. Among other actions, a new civil and family code became effective in 1964 (slightly revised in 1983), banning the caste system, the matrilineal filiation system, the customary heritage system, the dowry system, and polygamy. While this code was in tune with Christian teachings, it violated some fundamental animist and Islamic prescriptions. True to say, the State never took any punitive steps to enforce these regulations. Polygamy, for instance, was still practiced by 22.6% of married men nationwide in 1988.<sup>10</sup> What these legal measures revealed nonetheless was the partisanship of the State in favor of a Westernized model of civilization and modernity, bearer of potentially

universal and neutral principles but also marked by secularized Christian values and culture.

That is how the 1964 calendar officializing public holidays roughly renewed the one already in place since the colonial era, but added a few national holidays: most official holidays were those of Christians. Until the 1993 revisions of this calendar and the 1995 reforms of the work code, the main Islamic holidays were public only for Muslims: the civil service and public schools remained open on those days. Since then, *Lailat al-Qadr* and the Prophet's birthday (*Mawlid al-Nabi*) have been added to the list of national public holidays, as well as the days following *Tabaski* (*Id al-Adha*) and *Ramadan* (*Id al-Fitr*) when the holiday falls on a Sunday. When the curriculum for public education was discussed in the 1960s, Houphouët refused to include Arabic to the list of foreign languages offered at middle and high school levels (but Latin was an option). When the proposition was voiced again by the *Conseil National Islamique* in the mid-1990s, it provoked a general outcry on grounds that the Muslim federation was trying to Islamize Côte d'Ivoire. Conversely, since 1965, Quranic schools are required to teach French to be officially authorized (in practice, few of them did; many were not recognized anyway). This is not to say that the State was anti-Islamic, for it was not in the least. But it was not as neutral as it pretended to be. Without being rejected from the State, Islam and Muslims were relegated to a subaltern, marginal position.

### *3.2. Houphouët's and his successors' approach towards Muslims and the legacy of a political culture of Muslim subservience*

Though a devout Catholic, President Houphouët-Boigny developed close albeit ambiguous relations with Muslims and Islam. Rumors circulated that his father was a Muslim from Mali (he never either confirmed or denied the information). His first wife was a pious Muslim of mixed Akan and Senegalese parentage and one of his last mistresses was also a Muslim, in whose memory he built the prominent Riviera Golf mosque in Abidjan. He cultivated lasting spiritual friendships with renowned Sufi marabouts such as Yacouba Sylla or Amadou Hampaté Bâ and was captivated by traditional Islam's mysticism. In his political journey at the beginning of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA), many of his friends and collaborators were Muslim and Dioula and he forged a unique alliance with the family of the Senoufo patriarch Gbon Coulibaly of Korhogo, an important town in the North of the country. All these relations were politicized to a large extent as they served his hegemonic exchange strategy. But the sentimentality with which Houphouët spoke of these Muslim intimacies explains in part why the vast majority of Ivorian Muslims fondly liked the person and never ceased to support the president even though at the same time he deliberately albeit surreptitiously relegated them to a position of political subservience.

For even though Houphouët fully acknowledged the contribution of Muslims, Dioula and Northerners (categories often amalgamated, not entirely rightly) to the social and especially economic development of the nation – he even reminded them of their duty to push the country's growth always further – he categorically denied them any political autonomy. Since Houphouët saw himself as the ultimate defender of Muslims' interests, no one was ever allowed to come between him and the Muslim community. To keep the community in line, he used mostly two strategies: a strategy of co-optation, both financial and clientelist, and a strategy of control, ranging from discrete surveillance to outright repression. Houphouët ruled with money and gave many and generous gifts to Muslims: he built mosques, sent checks to imams, imams to Mecca and sugar for Ramadan. To second him, he appointed Mamadou Coulibaly, one of the barons of his regime, as the informal "Big Man" of Muslims. The latter was more a politician than a Muslim and more dedicated to his mentor and the ruling *Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire* (PDCI) than to solving Muslims' problems. As long as Muslims accepted Houphouët's gifts and political tutelage, their relations with the political authorities were uneventful. But whenever any Muslim hinted a critique at the existing order or rose to a position of threatening dominance, repression followed on grounds of sedition. Even Mamadou Coulibaly was once called to order after his return from his first pilgrimage in 1973. His religious contacts with Saudi dignitaries and representatives of pan-Islamic agencies had angered Houphouët. Indeed, so acute was the President's suspicion of Arab-Islamic countries exporting religious ideologies that until the year of his death, Côte d'Ivoire did not establish diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia (and when it did in 1993, Saudis were not allowed to open an embassy in Abidjan for another nine years). In the mid-1980s, Houphouët vetoed several transfers of funds from pan-Islamic agencies to Ivorian Muslim communities and associations. With Kadhafi's tours south of the Sahara in the period, foreign-sponsored Islamic threats were systematically instrumentalized to bridle or undo Muslim leaders and activities.

Houphouët thus created a now firmly rooted political culture in Côte d'Ivoire whereby State authorities are willing to express deference, even gratitude to Muslims (and Dioula and Northerners) as long as they refrain from making any political claim of their own. If the Muslim constituency appears to dissociate itself from the Head of State or ruling party, it can be accused of all ills, including treason to the nation, and repressed.

Though Muslims are incomparably freer to express and defend themselves since democracy's return in 1990 and the creation of the CNI in 1993, it remains striking how all of Houphouët's successors have continued, in different ways and with diverging results, some of Houphouët's practices in relation to Muslims. The constitutional heir, Henri Konan Bedié, capitalized on his family relations with Muslims in Daoukro and heavily invested in the building of mosques, including the new monumental Plateau mosque in Abidjan (not yet

completed in 2005). He appointed Balla Keita and Moustapha Diaby Koweit as his political Muslim “Big Men”. General Robert Guei, who overthrew Bédié in a coup d’Etat in 1999, built, among other mosques, the Akouedo military camp. In his pre-electoral campaign in June 2000, he distributed Qurans in all four corners of the country. Laurent Gbagbo and his *Front Populaire Ivoirien* (FPI) courted Muslims even more aggressively than did Alassane Ouattara in the mid-1990s. Once in power, he allowed Saudis to open an embassy in Abidjan and initiated Côte d’Ivoire’s membership to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), and the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO)<sup>11</sup> (this had not even been a Muslim claim: it falls within Gbagbo’s pragmatic search for new donors at a time when Western countries and institutions were withholding their financial support). Gbagbo also followed Houphouët’s strategy of matrimonial alliances by taking a Muslim Dioula from the North, Nady Bamba, as his second quasi-official wife.<sup>12</sup>

On the repressive side, Bédié developed the *ivoirité* ideology to eliminate his most serious opponent, Alassane Ouattara of the *Rassemblement des Républicains* (RDR). Bédié deprived many Muslim Dioula – equated with foreigners – of their citizenship rights in this process and directed his policy also against many foreigners, mostly Muslim Burkinabe. Determined at first to reconcile the divided nation and bury the hatchet with Muslims, Guei later allied himself to Gbagbo and pro-*ivoirité* Bishop Bernard Agré of the Catholic Church to prevent the presidency from falling into non-Christian hands. Guei would become president and Gbagbo his Prime Minister: Agré had them swear the secret agreement on the Bible.<sup>13</sup> After Gbagbo betrayed Guei, his supporters intimidated and murdered presumed pro-RDR Dioula and Muslim supporters in the post-electoral violence of October 2000. For the first time in Ivorian history, among other incidents that also affected non-Muslims, national politics resulted in the devastation of mosques, the burning of Qurans and the mauling of imams. Pro-FPI *gendarmes* (policemen) were also behind a mass grave of 57 Dioula bodies found in the Abidjan neighborhood of Yopougon.<sup>14</sup>

#### **4. From a Religion of “Old Dioula Traders” to that of “Young Educated Executives”: Muslim Leaders and their Islamic Interpretations in Historical Perspective**

Islam’s normative and universal tenets have always been realized differently in various historical and geographical contexts or among diverse societal groups at/in any given time or place: Côte d’Ivoire is no exception.<sup>15</sup> Whatever external influences were at play, Ivorian Muslims always elaborated and reworked their own local interpretations of Islam and formed multiple religious communities, sometimes converging, often compartmentalized or divided. What follows is a diachronic overview of the country’s main Muslim

collectivities and their specific conceptions of Islam, with a focus on the social and religious dimensions of both. The next section surveys their collective and differentiated approaches to politics in general and the Ivorian State in particular.

#### 4.1. “Traditional” Islam: from relative stagnation to Sufi revivalism<sup>16</sup>

Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqa*) have only had a peripheral influence on the collective lives of Muslims in the Ivorian region. The Tijaniyya and the Qadiriyya have been present since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the northern savanna but their influence has been confined to the spiritual lives of individual believers, generally learned men of a certain age. None ever had the centralized hierarchy and close-knit community that made them such powerful socioeconomic and political organizations in Senegal or Northern Nigeria.<sup>17</sup>

Even without *tariqas*, “traditional” Islam has long been a pervasive influence on Muslims’ daily lives, particularly as regards prayers, *Ramadan*, life cycle ceremonies and children’s education. A religion of traders living as minorities in non-Muslim contexts, Dioula Islamic culture in its local variants was generally infused by pragmatism and, until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, evolved away from the theologians’ disputes that periodically divided Muslims in Sudano-Sahelian regions. But though the destruction of Kong by Samori Touré’s armies in 1897 inflicted a severe blow to local Islamic learning, Dioula Islam was not as atonic as some colonial observers portrayed it. In the inter-war period, in the Muslim quarters or *dioulabougous* of the emerging urban centers of the South, where Dioulas of various regional origins mixed with new converts, less parochial and more standardized or “orthodox” practices of and discourses on Islam gradually emerged.<sup>18</sup>

The fact remains that in the context of the fast modernizing Ivorian society of the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in towns and among the young and modernly educated, traditional Islam gradually lost its appeal. Traditional education, consisting of rote memorization of the Quran in Arabic, was seen as inadequate at best. Friday sermons of traditionalist imams were mostly ritualistic – following a determined set of rules and religious topics, leaving aside any contemporary issue of a social or political nature – and unconcerned with pedagogy. Arabic, the language of sermons, was understood only by a tiny minority. A growing number of Muslims thus came to see Islam as an archaism of the past, unable to challenge modernity, in consonance with the prejudices of Ivorian public opinion at the time.

Yet traditional Islamic culture survived: not only did it not disappear with the emergence of new forms of Islam, but its relevance in social contexts of partial or failed modernization could also be reasserted. As in the past, it continues to play an important role in the lives of many Muslims, particularly in the North, in the countryside and in less privileged city quarters. The popularity of the Abidjan-based traditionalist leader Cheikh Azoumana Konaté, who died in

September 2005 while serving as Côte d'Ivoire "Grand Cheikh of Ivorian imams" (a function created by a CNI sister association in 1996) was evidence that traditional Islam is still a powerful reference point in the face of rapid change and adversity.<sup>19</sup>

What is more, in the past 15-20 years, owing in part to reformist influences, Sufi Islam has undergone a renewal process, both in terms of organization with the adoption of modern means of community management and communication, and in terms of membership. New Sufi leaders such as Cheikh Moustapha Sonta, self-proclaimed Khalifa of Tidjanis in Côte d'Ivoire, are behind the return of a significant number of young, educated and executive Muslims to mystical Islam. As in the past though, the trend reveals individual spiritual aspirations for self-improvement rather than collective commitments for action in the public sphere. Most new Sufis, particularly those who maintain reformist ideas (discrediting in the process antagonistic definitions of both Islamic paths) keep their Sufi identity private. Unbeknownst to many, some prominent reformist imams in Abidjan are also Sufis.

#### 4.2. "Wahhabi" or "Sunni" Islam: religious radicalism and social conservatism<sup>20</sup>

Wahhabi Islam is a scripturalist interpretation of the Quran and Hadiths, loosely inspired by the teachings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Arab theologian Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab; hence its name, first used by French colonials, but criticized as inappropriate by Ivorian "Wahhabis", who favored first the label "Orthodox", then "Sunni". Owing to Wahhabis' special way of crossing their arms during prayer, they have also been called "*bras croisés*" ("crossed arms"). Additional distinctive features include the tchador-like black veils for women and short trousers and beards for men.

Influential albeit minority, the Wahhabi movement emerged in the 1950s in Bouaké and Bamako, in the French Sudan, when a young generation of pilgrims and students (many of whom were Guineans) returned from Mecca, and in the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo. With new reformed Islamic schools or *madrasas* and the Dakar-based *Union Culturelle Musulmane* (Muslim Cultural Union or UCM), the movement gained ground throughout Côte d'Ivoire and French-speaking West Africa. While preaching a return to the pristine Islam of its origins, Wahhabis also denounced elements of the local cultural heritage as non-Islamic or *bid'a* (innovation). Attacks were at their most virulent against Sufi brotherhoods and the corporation of *marabouts*, depicted as vile social parasites and henchmen of colonial authorities. This led to tensions and open conflicts with traditionalists. Beneath those disputes were also socioeconomic differences. Wahhabis tended to be wealthy and *nouveaux riches* and they discredited marriage, funeral and other traditional customary spending in favor of rationalized investment.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise *madrasas* not only provided their children with basic religious instruction but also with the fundamentals of literacy and algebra to succeed in commerce in the modern age.

After independence, the Wahhabi movement lost momentum in Côte d'Ivoire. Many Guinean Wahhabi leaders returned home and the Wahhabis who stayed behind stopped sending their children to study in the Arab world, beheading their elite in the long run. Small communities with significant numbers of new converts to Islam formed in the Ivorian South. Unlike the Bouaké elite, many of their members were poor and illiterate. If Saudi money ever reached them, it was inconsequential.

In the early 1970s, after more than a decade of Houphouëtist authoritarian rule in the name of national unity, timid reforms allowed for the discrete public expression of religious and other (non-political) differences. Wahhabis were prompt to seize the opportunity, building their own mosques to pray separately from traditionalists, which spurred new tensions and conflicts. Calling upon the State to defend their right to religious freedom, Wahhabis created the *Association des Musulmans Orthodoxes de Côte d'Ivoire* (Association of Orthodox Muslims of Côte d'Ivoire or AMOCI) in 1976, which in the long run contributed to appeasing the situation. Separatism between Wahhabi and non-Wahhabi communities became the norm. In 1977, Wahhabis inaugurated their first large mosque in Abidjan, in the neighborhood of Bracodi Bar in Adjamé.

Soon after, in 1981, an internal dispute involving the Bracodi mosque's imam revealed extreme tensions between the local wealthier, educated elite on the one hand and the enlarging less privileged majority – with many foreign migrants – on the other. The dispute degenerated to such a point that despite the Interior Ministry's good offices, the AMOCI was suspended and the mosque closed. The conflict was resolved in 1986 but it was not until 1994 that the AMOCI reconstituted itself as the AMSCI, changing the epithet "Orthodox" for "Sunni". In the meantime, Bouaké, the historical center of Wahhabism, regained importance and Abidjan witnessed a slow movement of reconciliation between Sunnis and other Muslims, made easier by the rise of a new generation of modernist reformists (see details below). Though the two groups share a more normative interpretation of religion, a concern for reforming and democratizing Islamic education, the use of local languages for this purpose and a pro-active promotion of a new kind of Muslim identity, Wahhabis also differ from the more modern-minded reformists by their social conservatism especially vis-à-vis women, their Arabized culture and their antagonism towards Islamic pluralism.

Since the late 1990s, Abidjan and particularly the Cocody campus of the University of Abidjan have witnessed a resurgence of Sunni (now also called Salafi) discourses and activities. Young theologians trained in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait and anglophone Cocody students from Northern Nigeria have recruited followers, including young educated women, some of whom were expelled from university after they refused to identify themselves by showing their face before

exams. For the first time, tensions arose with other reformist groups, criticized as liberal renovators. For instance, the prayer nights organized on campus every year by an association of Muslim students before exam time were devaluated as *bid'a*, or *non-Islamic innovation*. Under the young wing's influence, the AMSCI moved out of the CNI, of which it had been a founding member in 1993. In August 2005, it put in place its own Sunni Council of *imams*. It is difficult to answer the question of how many followers the AMSCI has today as really no data exists on the AMSCI and wahhabi following. It can be stated, however, that the movement has clearly remained a minority, albeit a non-negligible one.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4.3. *Reformist Islam: the middle and upper classes' struggle to reconcile Islam and modernity*

In the 1960s and 1970s, the "Ivorian economic miracle" paid for generalized access to the official school system with a secular and Western-oriented curriculum taught in French and national degrees leading to liberal professions and executive positions in the public and private formal sectors. For a small but enlarging group of Muslims, this was a formidable tool of social mobility. The phenomenon was particularly marked in the South, where economic activities were concentrated (by contrast, the savanna and northern neighboring countries fell into relative under-development) and in towns, most notably Abidjan, which monopolized the country's best high schools and institutes of higher education. Over time, a new middle and upper class of Westernized Muslims emerged. It was from their ranks that a new group of reformist Muslims arose in the early 1970s who were all French-speaking young men and women educated in official non-Islamic schools, secular or Christian.

These young Muslims were disenchanted by Marxist ideologies and the then pervasive materialism of Ivorian society but also ill at ease with the traditional Islamic heritage that their parents had transmitted to them somewhat passively. In their quest for a meaningful faith that could reconcile spirituality and modernity, they were decisively guided by three theologians trained in the Arab world: the Tidjani Cheikh Tidjane Ba (d. in 2001), the Wahhabi Mohamed Lamine Kaba and the visionary reformist Aboubacar Fofana, maybe the most influential Ivorian Muslim leader in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dioula- and Arabic-speakers, all three gradually became fluent in French to reach this particular audience. Their initial hope had been to mobilize *madrassa* students but those did not respond to the ambitious task of rethinking the interface between Islam and modernity and the place and role of Muslims in the Ivorian context. Part of the explanation is that they did not collectively question their Islam, were not an integral part of modern society and were not conversant with its critical and dialectical modes of reasoning. Together, fortified by their triple African, Islamic and Western culture, the French-speaking Muslim youth and the three Arabized theologians gradually elaborated a new interpretation of Islam. Reformist Islam

was an orthodox but contextualized interpretation of the dogma, designed to give an Islamic response to the changing needs and aspirations of contemporary Ivorian Muslim society and more specifically the Muslim middle and upper class. Among other aspects, reformists advocated the community's unity within absolute respect for the pluralism of Islamic expressions (*Ahmadiyya* excepted), unflinching tolerance for other religions, including African traditional religions, a strict separation between Islam and issues of ethnicity or nationality, and a liberal approach towards Muslim women and gender relations.

To promote these views, reformists put in place innovative organizations and activities. The first national reformist association was the *Association des Elèves et Etudiants Musulmans de Côte d'Ivoire* (Muslim Students Association of Côte d'Ivoire or AEEMCI). First launched in 1972, a political freeze delayed its official recognition until 1979. Its main activity remains a yearly two-week seminar designed to improve students' knowledge of their religion and the Islamic sociability of these young men and women coming from all four corners of the country to a new host town every summer. Tidjane Ba, Mohamed Lamine Kaba and Aboubacar Fofana were their indefatigable teachers and advisers, not only attending the seminars but also animating weekly discussions in Abidjan and traveling widely to meet AEEMCI students in their localities. In 1977, through the agency of a reformist journalist, they contributed to a new weekly Islamic program on national television, whose rational pedagogy in French was attractive to many and even triggered a wave of conversions.

Until the mid-1980s, most Westernized Muslim adults with executive positions in the public or private sector were reluctant to join the reformist movement despite its targeted efforts to recruit them. The reasons were in part feelings of inferiority rooted in the idea that Islam was backward and fears that commitment to Islam would endanger their careers (the memory of the 1960s "false plots" which allowed Houphouët to repress many members of the Dioula political intelligentsia was still alive<sup>23</sup>). The situation gradually changed after the 1982 creation of the *Communauté Musulmane de la Riviera* (*Riviera Muslim Community* or CMR; Riviera is a posh residential neighborhood in the Cocody district). The founders were a small group of young Muslim executives, some of whom had been AEEMCI leaders and who were all dedicated to the three theologians. Informal on purpose to avoid any political harnessing and internal competition, the CMR was a fertile ground for further intense intellectual debates and innovative experiments in community management.

Out of the AEEMCI, the CMR and the particular influence of Aboubacar Fofana, several new associations were created which targeted Muslim society's various socioeconomic groups and their common needs. Three associations were put in place in 1988: the *Conseil Supérieur des Imams* (Supreme Council of Imams or COSIM, officially recognized in 1991), which brought together for the first time traditionalist, Wahhabi, reformist and other imams; the *Association des Jeunes Musulmans de Côte d'Ivoire* (Young Muslim Association of Côte d'Ivoire

or AJMCI, recognized in 1992), for all young Muslims who were not or no longer in school; and the *Ligue Islamique des Prédicateurs de Côte d'Ivoire* (Islamic League of Muslim Preachers of Côte d'Ivoire or LIPCI, recognized in 1991), for preachers of all sectarian tendencies to coordinate their educative and missionary activities. After democracy's return in 1990, additional organizations were formed, among them were: the *Secours Médical Islamique* (Islamic Medical Relief or SEMI), the *Association des Femmes Musulmanes de Côte d'Ivoire* (Muslim Women's Association of Côte d'Ivoire or AFMCI) and the *Conseil National pour l'Organisation du Pèlerinage à la Mecque* (National Council for the Organization of the Pilgrimage to Mecca or CNOPM). The process of communal reorganisation culminated in the creation of the CNI federation in 1993, supported by all reformist associations, the Wahhabi national organ and 45 local Muslim associations and communities (500 in 2005). Koudouss Idriss Koné, barely known at the time, was elected president, after Aboubacar Fofana had declined the position so as to protect the CNI from the political authorities' acute distrust of his own person.

The CNI was then challenging the other existing Islamic federation, the *Conseil Supérieur Islamique* (Supreme Islamic Council or CSI). Established during the time of the oil boom in 1979 upon the initiative of foreign representatives of the Muslim World League, the CSI's main objective had been to coordinate sporadic local requests for financial assistance with the approval of the Ivorian State. But the CSI – and similar competing Islamic associations of the time – quickly became the springboard for ambitious Muslim civil servants to claim their share of political power and lobby for funds. For a short decade, these aspirations matched Houphouët's strategy to co-opt Muslim leaders and redistribute money. Yet when Ivorian-Arab relations turned sour by the late 1980s, the CSI was quickly silenced and reduced to an empty shell. Moustapha Diaby Koweit, a newcomer without religious credentials, resuscitated the ghost federation in 1991 with the backing of the then "Big Man" of Muslims, Lazéni Coulibaly, and a major grant from the Dakar venue of the *Organization of the Islamic Conference*. As before, the CSI under Diaby Koweit was all about personal ambitions, money and PDCI power. In 1995, Diaby Koweit was even elected MP of the northern town of Samatiguila and served as Henri Konan Bedié's religious advisor (he consequently had to flee the country after the 1999 coup d'Etat). CSI and CNI were thus completely at odds: indeed, the latter had been created in part because of the reformists' outrage at Koweit's handling of Muslim matters. Koweit tried in vain to convince the government and foreign media that the CNI was a hotbed of radical Islamists. Unlike the CNI, the CSI had, in reality, virtually no influence at grassroots level.<sup>24</sup> Koweit's reappearance as a presidential candidate for the 2005 national election seems little more than a masquerade.

In its early years, the CNI attracted enormous and widespread enthusiasm and support from the Muslim population. The *ivoirité* crisis also contributed to

many Dioula, northerners' and foreigners' awareness of their Muslim identity. Though the CNI was in no way a by-product of post-Houphouëtist Ivorian politics, these politics reinforced Muslims' allegiance to the CNI. Popular expectations of the CNI were so high that a decade later, disenchantment was not absent. For instance, the CNI leadership is now criticized for failing to renew itself and democratize. Nonetheless, the CNI remains to this day the most representative and influential of all competing Islamic federations, several of which have been created since the late 1990s but remain marginal. In 1996, the editor-in-chief of the Ivorian daily *Le Jour* estimated that only about ten mosques adhered to the CSI nationwide, the rest following the CNI. In 2005, CSI's influence was even more negligible, but with CNI's power of attraction having weakened and new, competing federations having been created, its quasi-monopolistic influence has also eroded.

## **5. Muslims' Approach Towards the Ivorian State: Old and New Traditions of Accommodation**

Since independence, Muslims have adopted a remarkably stable and homogeneous position vis-à-vis the Ivorian State (for further details on this, see the section below on the relations with the Arab-Islamic world). Whatever their differences and the political circumstances, they all advocated and practiced accommodation, which can be defined as constructive engagement towards the State, of which Muslims felt an integral part. To use Quranic terminology, Muslims' collective choice was against *hijra* (exile, disengagement) and *jihad* of the sword (violent rejection of the State) in favor of *taqiyya* (accommodation). If submission was made easier by Houphouët's fraternal alliance with Muslims and was at times constrained by the threat or reality of repression, accommodation was also a lasting tradition deeply rooted in Dioula society. Minority merchant Dioula communities living among majority non-Muslim societies have long followed the Suwari tradition of West African Islam, named after the 15<sup>th</sup> century Malian scholar El Hadj Salim Suwari. This tradition is characterized by a separation of religion and politics. It offers an apolitical interpretation of Islam, legitimizing religious pluralism and non-Islamic rule. Suwari Islam thus unites Muslims to keep their distance from and avoid confronting political power in order to better focus on religious education and spirituality. As in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, Muslims accommodated to the postcolonial State, last in a long line of "infidel" rulers. Traditionalists have probably remained the most politically submissive of all Ivorian Muslims.

If Muslims accepted the nation-State with much enthusiasm, it was also out of pragmatism. More immersed in trade and informal activities than inclined towards politics, Dioulas and foreigners alike supported Houphouët's regime because it secured the kind of peace and stability that was propitious to their

commercial and religious affairs. Likewise, they backed Houphouët's policy that "the land belongs to whoever cultivates it", against the conviction of southern autochthons that it was inalienably theirs and that non-natives were mere colonialists. Muslims defended their president even in the midst of the democratic turmoil in 1990, when the Catholic Church voiced cautious criticism at the government's handling of civic liberties.

After Houphouët's death, Ivorian Muslims continued to be legalistic, republican and patriotic. Wahhabis and reformists always maintained that good Muslims ought to be good citizens, good workers and good neighbors. The effort to re-Islamize Muslim society was presented as a contribution towards the re-moralization of society at large; the drive to unite Muslims was part of the broader nation-building process; the endeavor to reform Islam also meant that Muslims would be better integrated into Côte d'Ivoire's modern political economy; and reformists' insistence on religious tolerance clearly aimed at consolidating the country's social peace. Muslim leaders were never anti-authoritarian or against the State. As a matter of fact, whenever national cohesion and the State's stability appeared threatened, they made public calls for appeasement, often in partnership with their Christian counterparts, as happened in 1995, 2000 and after September 2002.

The creation of the CNI in 1993 inaugurated a partial reorientation of this tradition of accommodation. In the context of the broadening of democratic culture following the recognition of the freedoms of association and expression, the CNI claimed the right to express and defend Muslims' interests and concerns in the public sphere. In other words, it emancipated itself and henceforward refused co-option, either clientelist or financial. The CNI had been the outcome of a long process to bring Islam out of its isolation in mosques and the ritualistic sphere to open up to the country's social, cultural and political life. The younger, modern-educated CNI- and COSIM-affiliated imams thus took upon themselves to serve not only as religious leaders for their communities but also as sorts of public intellectuals for the nation at large. They resolved to dispense non-partisan advice on issues of public interest, particularly when they felt that the nation's fate was at stake. In July 2000 for instance, on the eve of the referendum on the new constitution, the COSIM made a public statement against the proposed changes in the constitution, arguing that these would breed exclusion, division and conflict.<sup>25</sup> In the context of the demographic enlargement of the Muslim population nationwide, the CNI also claimed for more Muslim/Dioula/Northerners' participation in matters of the State. This demand stigmatized the enduring Houphouëtist political legacy of Muslim subservience and marginalization. The CNI itself is strictly apolitical and its leaders display a thorough abjuration of their right to be elected to positions of political authority in the name of the separation of religion and politics.<sup>26</sup> But they call upon individual lay Muslims to respond to the challenge of their own social and political responsibility by militating for just causes in movements of their choice along with other Muslims and non-Muslims.

Overall, the CNI thus aims at serving as the focal point of an emerging Ivorian Islamic civil society.

Because it was a novelty in Côte d'Ivoire that imams were taking stands of a political nature (a novelty that could also upset the established order) and because the creation of the CNI roughly coincided with Houphouët's death and the birth of the RDR, voices were heard from the mid-1990s that vilified the CNI as a clique of fundamentalists bent on Islamizing the State. These were mere prejudices aimed at delegitimizing Muslim autonomization in the public sphere. Indeed, one of the main political struggles of the CNI remains to protect and enhance the separation between the State, the Church, and the mosque. Not only does the CNI accommodate to secularism (*laïcité* or laity), it has also become its most ardent advocate.<sup>27</sup> This state of affairs is partly grounded in the reality of Houphouët's religions-friendly conception of secularism and in the reformist elites' conviction that laity is in the end the best political mode of management of religions in a context of rich cultural and spiritual pluralism. Secularism also allows Muslims to avoid politicizing divisions (*fitna* or communal scissions) and a loss of moral ideals (according to the view that politics are corrupting).

As a result, Muslims in general and the CNI in particular never requested the *de jure* implementation of the *Shari'a* in the public sphere – the reality being that in spite of the Ivorian law's prohibition of customary and other jurisprudence, the application of the Islamic civil code (particularly as regards marriage, divorce and inheritance) is *de facto* tolerated in the Muslim private sphere. In 2001, the CNI even established an *Observatoire de la laïcité* (Observatory of secularism) to promote the neutral and egalitarian application of secularism and condemn any infringement in actual practices. The Ivorian case is one among many showing that Islam, secularism and democracy are no oxymorons. Far from being radical, the CNI is actually not devoid of a certain conservatism in that it aims at contributing to the safeguarding of the State's institutions and principles. Today as in the past, Islam thus remains a stabilizing factor of the State in Côte d'Ivoire.

## **6. Islam within Society: Education and Social Welfare Activism**

### *6.1. Education and the Muslim media*

Islamic education – at home, at school, in the community – has always been a priority for Ivorian Muslims, however differentiated their epistemological views of the subject might have been. Despite criticism of a functionalist nature, traditional Quranic schools continue to play an important role in the safekeeping of Muslim identity and the social cohesion of many local communities, particularly outside the main cities. In these traditional Quranic schools children gather around a teacher, often on the floor, to memorize the Quran in Arabic by heart with the help of washable tablets. Quranic teachers have also adapted to the

circumstances. Wherever large numbers of Muslim children are enrolled in secular or Christian schools (the latter being reputed among the country's best), they offer Islamic classes in late afternoons and during holidays. Since the pioneer initiatives of the Wahhabi movement and the UCM in the 1950s, reformed Islamic schools or *madrassa* (where children are taught the fundamentals of religion along with secular topics, Arabic and sometimes French, in a Western-style classroom setup) are found in most Ivorian towns.<sup>28</sup> The bulk of the country's best *madrassa* are in Bouaké: one of them is the *Dar al-Hadith*. Built by a wealthy local entrepreneur, the Williamsville Cultural Islamic Center was Abidjan's largest and most influential *madrassa* for a short decade (approx. 1976-84) but it lost its prominence after the departure of its director, the reformist theologian Mohammed Lamine Kaba.

From the 1980s on, the new generation of reformists gave discouraging reviews of both Quranic schools and *madrassa*'s general situation in Côte d'Ivoire. Many of these schools' problems were internal. With no public subsidies and very limited foreign assistance – owing mostly to Ivorian Muslims' lack of lobbying *savoir-faire* and Houphouët's reluctance to let Arab-Islamic money in but also, not uncommonly, to parents' difficulties and even reluctance to pay for their children's education – these schools lacked basic amenities. Without clear recruitment policies, some Islamic teachers were below standard levels. Others were disaffected by their poor pay and had to rely on another occupation on the side. General lack of coordination prevented those schools from tackling important issues, such as the lack of appropriate textbooks. Other problems were of a politico-administrative nature. With few recent exceptions, Islamic schools come under the Interior and not the Education Ministry, because, unlike most Christian schools, they do not teach the national curriculum in French. Consequently, their degrees are not officially recognized. In practice, even Islamic students with a knowledge of French and secular topics were often (but not always) prevented from taking the national tests to get an equivalent rating of their degree. This general problem had been a major struggle of the UCM and the 1976 *Association des Enseignants Coraniques* (Quranic Teachers' Association or AEC, now ASSOENCOCI), to no avail. Islamic school leavers were thus prevented from entering the formal sector's job market and confined to precarious informal activities and oftentimes unemployment. Feelings of inferiority *vis-à-vis* Western-educated students and resentment at the kind of education they received were especially marked among *madrassa* students. According to various reformist reports, a regretful result was that a majority of juvenile offenders and drug addicts in a city like Abidjan were former *madrassa* students.<sup>29</sup> This observation notwithstanding, there are also *madrassas* of good standing and they collectively continue to attract enrollment especially when students are not fluent in French, when they are too old for their school level to be admitted into the public system, or when their parents are attached to religious education.

To overcome this predicament, since the late 1980s, reformists experimented with a new kind of Islamic school following the Christian model. The “conventional confessional Islamic school” adopts the official curriculum and French as the only language of instruction. Islamic and Arabic lessons are facultative and student recruitment is not limited to Muslims. In 1993, the CNI and the State signed a convention so that Islamic schools meeting those criteria would be recognized and subsidized. The first such “conventional” school was the Cissé Kamourou confessional elementary school of Gagnoa in 1987. One of the most recent ones is the 2004 *Iqra* school complex in the Yopougon neighborhood of Abidjan. Though promising in the eyes of many Muslims, these schools are still very much a minority nationwide. The CNI-affiliated *Organisation des Etablissements d’Enseignement Confessionnel Islamique* (Islamic Schools’ Organization or OEECI) has been established to follow up on these education issues.

Ivorian Muslims and particularly reformists have also designed innovative ways of teaching Islam outside of the classroom. Conferences, seminars, breakfast-, lunch-, or dinner-debates have been offered to the Muslim public since the late 1970s, along with Islamic programs on national radio and television. But all attempts to create an Islamic press have thus far failed, due to distribution shortcomings and financial hardships. Among the now extinct titles were the CMR-sponsored monthly magazine *Allahou Akbar* (1981-82 and 1989-93) and the AEEMCI-sponsored monthly, later weekly newspaper *Plume Libre* (1991-95 and 2000-02), both in French. In November 2001, after many years of reformist lobbying, the Islamic FM *Al-Bayane* began broadcasting in Abidjan. Placed under the CNI’s general supervision, its director is Djiguiba Cissé, also imam of the Plateau. It offers religious and other non-political programs in French, Arabic, and many vernacular languages. In 2005, the radio organized a major fundraising operation to purchase a transmitter to expand the FM’s diffusion radius to approx. 150-200 kilometers from Abidjan. It was a major success, even non-Muslims gave donations: evidence that Al-Bayan has met a faithful urban audience and is contributing, however modestly, to redress Islam’s traditionally negative public image.<sup>30</sup> This notwithstanding, the weekly Islamic TV program mentioned above, which started in 1977, continues to this day as well.

## 6.2. *Social welfare activism: a new concern*

Until the early 1990s, mutual help among Muslims existed only at local and communal levels, on an *ad hoc*, personal and informal basis. When a need arose, money went directly from pocket to pocket without intermediaries or grand ideas of social redistribution. The Abidjan-based reformist associations were the first to make ardent calls for social welfare activism, understood as an effort to institutionalize Islamic solidarity for the benefit not only of Muslims but of the whole Ivorian society. With this, reformists clearly emulated the charitable actions

of the Catholic Church and no less clearly differed from Protestant neo-Pentecostal churches with their emphasis on personal success and material wealth.

Muslim students, women and executives began touring hospitals, orphanages, prisons and leper houses. Everywhere, they tried to create a prayer space or a mosque for the suffering, the destitute and the marginalized. They also sponsored blood and medicine donation days. A small number of organizations entirely devoted to Islamic welfare were established later. The *Secours Médical Islamique* (Medical Islamic Relief or SEMI) brings together all kinds of Muslim health professionals to provide medical assistance to those in need and attempt to improve the quality of care in the country. Among its regular activities are free vaccination and AIDS awareness campaigns. It also runs a handful of Islamic clinics in Abidjan and other towns. Founded as an association, the SEMI became an NGO in 1998 to be eligible for receiving funds from the Health Ministry and the World Health Organization. Two other Islamic NGOs, *Action Justice* and *SOS Exclusion*, are dedicated to fight all forms of exclusion, legal, political, ethnic, socioeconomic or otherwise. To avoid the political authorities' line of sight at the height of the *ivoirité* crisis, both went underground after September 2002. Ibrahim Bredji, the imam of the Maca, Abidjan's main prison, founded *Le Nouvel Espoir* (The New Hope), an NGO dedicated to the care of inmates and their families as well as prisoners' social reintegration. Djiguiba Cissé, imam of the Plateau and director of *Al-Bayane*, created the *Fondation Djigui, La Grande Espérance* (Djigui Foundation, The Great Expectation) mostly to address the problem of AIDS and care for those living with the HIV but also to fight female genital mutilations and all forms of violence against women. Yet, in the absence of an established system to collect the *zakat*, Islamic social activities remain limited and as a matter of fact mostly centered around Abidjan.

## **7. Islam, Transnationalism and Globalization**

### *7.1. Relations with the Arab-Islamic world*

Unlike in Senegal, Mali or Burkina Faso, the 1970s' oil booms were not followed by a massive influx of Arab-Islamic financial aid to Côte d'Ivoire. This state of affairs was in part rooted in Ivorian Muslim associations' own internal weaknesses but more significantly in Houphouët's enduring distrust of pan-Islamic organizations, especially those linked to Saudi Arabia, Iran and Libya (for details, see above section on Houphouët's approach towards Muslims). The level of international assistance sporadically received by local Muslim communities, Wahhabi included, was dwarfed in comparison to that secured by the Catholic

and Protestant churches. After the CNI was created, pan-Islamic organizations did not even recognize it until the very end of the 1990s. Even still in 1998, when the World Supreme Council for Mosques (an organization of the Muslim World League) agreed to host a congress in Abidjan, Diaby Koweit's CSI patronized it (and all CNI-affiliated associations boycotted it; the congress was a media event at best).<sup>31</sup>

Though no doubt a handicap to a certain extent, the scarcity of outside funds and logistical assistance nonetheless became a comparative advantage for Ivorian Muslims in the long run. Côte d'Ivoire was spared the Arab world's religious and ideological divisions that have been imported along with petrodollars into other countries, as in neighboring Ghana. While Ivorian Muslims gained autonomy and creativity by counting on their own material and intellectual resources, they also belatedly succeeded in finding alternative non-Arab and non-Iranian para-governmental sources of funding and inspiration. For a few years in the late 1980s, the *Communauté Musulmane de la Riviera* (CMR) closely cooperated with the United States-based SAAR Foundation, named after a Saudi billionaire businessman. Among other outputs, reformist leaders were trained to new conceptions and techniques of *da'wa* (or missionary activity) and in Abidjan in 1991 they launched a yearly *Séminaire International de Formation des Responsables d'Associations Musulmanes* (International Training Seminar for Islamic Associations' Leaders or SIFRAM), which soon gained regional respect. Ivorian and other West African Muslim children were also sent to Islamic summer camps in the USA for two consecutive years.<sup>32</sup> Reformists later welcomed US-governmental policy of rapprochement with moderate Muslim actors. Even before September 11, a few had participated in the International Visitor Leadership Program of the US Department of State. When the failed coup occurred in September 2002, Aboubacar Fofana was in the United States, where he then remained living in forced exile. Contacts with Europeans intensified after the now famous Swiss Islamicist Tariq Ramadan associated himself with the CMR to launch the *Colloque International des Musulmans de l'Espace Francophone* (International Congress of Francophone Muslims or CIMEF).<sup>33</sup> The first CIMEF was organized in Abidjan in 2000. Due to the political unrest, it was subsequently hosted in Cotonou, Benin, in 2002 and in Niamey, Niger, in 2004.

Relations between the Arab-Islamic world and both the Ivorian government and Ivorian Muslim associations have taken on a new dynamic after Gbagbo's pragmatic opening up towards all potential sources of financial aid (also including China and Russia). But though reformists welcome new Saudi and Saudi-derived money, they are unwilling to renounce their locally adapted interpretation of Islam and more generally, their autonomy. Reformists have long expressed discomfort at the theological and social inflexibility that Ivorian graduates of Saudi universities tend to display after they return home. The CMR thus recently conceived a project to create an international institute for training imams in Abidjan. Though the money may come from the Islamic Development

Bank, education will abide by the principle of dialectics (meaning that not just one but all Islamic traditions and *ulama's* viewpoints should be presented critically) and will include secular topics relating to the local African environment.<sup>34</sup>

The long-established Lebanese community of Côte d'Ivoire is mostly religiously passive on the public scene. One exception was the Shi'a movement initiated by Imam Cheikh Jaafar Sayegh (1929-96) in the neighborhood of Adjamé in Abidjan in the 1980s. Not unlike the Ahmadiyya mission, also based in Adjamé and directed by Pakistanis, it attracted mostly poor urban dwellers and migrants, often foreigners and women. In the past ten years, though, as Iran became more present in Côte d'Ivoire both on the religious and socioeconomic fronts, more African Sunnis have converted to Shi'a Islam, rising to positions of imamship in either non-denominational or new Shi'a mosques.<sup>35</sup> It is difficult to measure the numbers of Shi'a adherents as the numbers given by Shi'a themselves are so obviously exaggerated that they seem useless. Shi'a are a very small minority but one whose influence is growing. Iran also financed the *Mahad Ahlul-Beit Aleiyhem As-Salam* Islamic University in Riviera-Palmeraie in Abidjan and is about to complete a new monumental religious complex in the neighborhood of Marcory, with a Shi'a mosque and a free clinic. So far, minority Shi'a have displayed a non-antagonistic public attitude towards the majority Muslim society.

## 7.2. *Ivorian Muslim attitude vis-à-vis radicalism*

Today, as in the past, Ivorian Muslims of all backgrounds unanimously maintain that their Islam is one of peace and ecumenical tolerance, poles apart from an Islam of armed conquest and state seizure: to the best of my knowledge, there has not been any discordant voice throughout Côte d'Ivoire in the postcolonial era. Even before September 11, the influential Tidjane Ba denounced the Taliban of Afghanistan as the "shame of Islam", people "who did not understand a thing of our religion".<sup>36</sup> The day following 11 September 2001, the CNI addressed the local US embassy with a public statement of categorical condemnation of the violent acts and empathy for the victims' families and the American nation.<sup>37</sup> Professing that Muslims are not weak, but follow a religion of wisdom and the golden mean, the CNI systematically called for non-retaliation, moderation and patience in the face of all recent attacks against mosques, imams or Muslims in the country. Since Ivorian Muslims share with their leaders an abhorrence of violence, with few localized exceptions, they collectively complied.

## 8. **Uncivil State: Muslims and Violence since the Civil War in September 2002**

When the military coup failed on September 19, 2002, and rebel forces (later renamed “New Forces”) claimed the northern half of the country, Gbagbo’s regime and pro-governmental media presented the crisis as Côte d’Ivoire’s September 11. The rebellion was equated to religious terrorism and the civil war to the combat of fanatic Muslim Northerners against loyalist Christian Southerners. The born-again rhetoric of a battle between good and evil and President George W. Bush’s notion of an “axis of evil” were vigorously dealt out. But what were mere tactics to enflame the population and confer a supra-political dimension to the conflict did not achieve the expected results. The majority of the population was simply not duped. If anything, it soon became clear to most that the minority of neo-Pentecostal devotees moving in political circles were the implicated party with the most aggressive ideology. Even though a reading of the war through the sole coverage of some Ivorian media may lead to think otherwise, the population did not collectively embrace the hate ideology of Gbagbo’s regime (street actions were not spontaneous expressions of popular support; they were carefully choreographed from above with the help of militias). This is not to say that no tensions existed at the grassroots level. But these were mostly non-religious and rooted in the political crisis of the 1990s. In the countryside, tensions between autochthons and non-natives even predated the *ivoirité* era. In many ways, the Ivorian “civil” war is only a conflict of political chiefs fought primarily in Abidjan (since January 2003, the New Forces leaders – many of whom are not Muslims – have spent more time in Abidjan than in Bouaké) mostly for political reasons and, given the patrimonialist nature of the State, for economic ones as well. It is in no way a religious war.

In the meantime, in the aftermath of September 2002, Muslims suffered both physical and moral violence at the hands of armed forces in the government-controlled South. Violence against Christians in the rebellious North also took place on a smaller scale.<sup>38</sup> Security forces killed Muslim civilians, like in Daloa in October 2002. They routinely hit and harassed many more at roadblocks, even though the political economy of money extortion was neither purely ideological nor restricted to Muslims. When rumor had it that arms were hidden in mosques, some were violated. More seriously, until 2005, ten Muslim religious leaders were assassinated, most apparently by the Presidency-controlled “death squadrons”. When imam Mahmoud Samassi of Abidjan was murdered in January 2003 – the third imam to die of a violent death in less than three months – the CNI organized a public funeral march in protest: it was the only time that Koudouss Idriss Koné raised an angry voice against the regime.<sup>39</sup> On all other occasions, the CNI issued public calls for appeasement and the return of peace, via the *Al-Bayane radio station* in particular. The CNI’s position has been to remain neutral *vis-à-vis* both the New Forces and the ruling regime, attracting discrete criticism for being too soft on Gbagbo. In any event, the war did not provoke a political radicalization of Islamic discourses. The new Sunni radicalism is exclusively directed towards rituals and non-political issues of

theology: as a matter of fact, Sunnis have publicly pledged to contribute to the return of peace in the country.<sup>40</sup>

On a few occasions, accusations of Muslim extremism circulated. But like the CSI's insinuations of the mid-1990s, these mostly emanated from Islamic organizations hostile to the CNI and now co-opted by Gbagbo's regime. Some of these organizations were recent associations of Muslim converts, notably Bété, Gbagbo's own ethnic group. For instance, when an assassination attempt against Cardinal Agré was reported in October 2003, Harrissou Fofana (a marginal figure by all accounts, associated to the unimportant organization *Al Coran*) publicly declared that the RDR had offered him and other Muslim leaders big money to kill unspecified targets; though he himself declined, others supposedly accepted. The *Forum des Confessions Religieuses* (Forum of Religious Bodies) quickly stepped in to discredit the allegation as malicious fabrication and remind Ivorians of all religious affiliations to remain vigilant in the face of rumors or actions meant to provoke their antagonism. Since the war began, the Forum has thus played a very important role, if only a symbolic one, in preventing an escalation of the conflict. Indeed, Muslim, Christian, and other religious leaders' common public declarations and TV appearances favorably impressed the population. Most neo-Pentecostal churches were not members of the Forum because they contested its leader, Ediémou Blin Jacob. Following the anti-French violence of November 2004, a new transitory *Collectif des Confessions Religieuses pour la Paix et la Réconciliation en Côte d'Ivoire* (Religions Group for Peace and Reconciliation in Côte d'Ivoire) was established to incorporate them.<sup>41</sup>

Even more important were the actions taken by the *Collectif de la Société Civile pour la Paix* (Civil Society Group for Peace in Côte d'Ivoire or CSCP). Founded on October 19, 2002, by Honoré Guié, GERDDES-CI's president and the 1995 initiator of the *Forum des Confessions Religieuses*, the CSCP brings together civil society associations, human rights movements and religious organizations, including the Forum, to find ways and means to bring back a lasting peace to the country. Muslim and Christian CSCP representatives trained in the techniques of conflict resolution thus contributed to missions or peace caravans organized throughout the governmental zone by listening to and educating local communities. UNDP's financial withdrawal has thus far prevented those missions from covering the North.<sup>42</sup>

Muslim contacts between South and North have remained mostly fluid. Once, in January 2005, a communication problem resulted in the celebration of *Tabaski* on different days in each zone. But this was an exception: the religious authority of all CNI and COSIM-affiliated associations has not been openly challenged. Yet the experience of *de facto* autonomy in the North led to local initiatives. New Islamic associations were created at grassroots level, some entrepreneurs tried to organize air transportation for the *hajj* directly from Bouaké (it failed), and a new local Islamic FM began broadcasting in Bouaké, with *Al-*

*Bayane's* moral and technical support. On a different level, Muslims in the North expressed concern at what they saw as animism's return in strength, symbolized by amulet-protected *dozo* hunters who emerged from the war with new positions of regional power. In an allegorical fashion, longing for peace has also been articulated by the desire to return to pray at the mosque.

When it became obvious that opponents to the Gbagbo regime were not exclusively those having an affiliation with Islam or the North, attacks on Muslims – verbal or physical – receded. Crucial in this development was the creation of the Rally of Houphouëtists for Democracy and Peace (RHDP) in May 2005, bringing together the PDCI and the RDR, former political enemies now convinced that alone, they can neither win elections nor reduce the PFI to the position of a marginal opposition party. Even the *ivoirité* polemics have calmed down, as many Akans among other southern autochthons have now distanced themselves from an ideology championed mostly by the so-called “BAD patriotic galaxy”, named after the Bété, Attié and Dida. If it is clear that Ivorian Muslims are no longer willing to accept political subordination and, even less, exclusion, it appears no less clear that they aspire to the re-establishment of a more peaceful, just, and cohesive national State and society in the old albeit reformed tradition of Côte d'Ivoire's civil Islam.

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<sup>1</sup> For further details on this and all subsequent sections, see Miran (forthcoming).

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- <sup>2</sup> *Rapport sur l'immigration en Côte d'Ivoire*, published in *Le Jour*, April 8, 1999 (excerpts have been reprinted in *Politique africaine* 2000: 77). *Enquête ivoirienne sur les migrations et l'urbanisation* 1996.
- <sup>3</sup> *Le Jour*, May 20, 1999 (excerpts reprinted in *Politique africaine* 2000: 75-93).
- <sup>4</sup> CHEAM 1966; Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat 1975, 1988 and 1988; *Enquête ivoirienne sur les migrations et l'urbanisation* 1996.
- <sup>5</sup> Bassett 2003.
- <sup>6</sup> See for instance "Ordnation du nouvel évêque d'Odienné: Chrétiens et musulmans communient", *Nord Sud*, October 18, 2005.
- <sup>7</sup> On Sakho see Jeusset/Deniel 1986; on Tidjane Ba see Ba 2000 and Miran 2000.
- <sup>8</sup> Miran (October 2000).
- <sup>9</sup> Brezault/Clavreuil 1987: 114 (author's translation). Fofana's interview, published without his consent, caused him many political problems.
- <sup>10</sup> Zanou/Aka 1994 : 7.
- <sup>11</sup> *Fraternité Matin*, February 5 and June 7, 2002.
- <sup>12</sup> On Gbagbo's recent moves in favor of Muslims, see for instance "Tentative de séduction avant le sommet de l'UA: Gbagbo distribue du sucre dans les Ambassades", *Le Patriote*, October 5, 2005.
- <sup>13</sup> The information is now well-attested in Côte d'Ivoire. Conversations with journalists and university professors, Abidjan, September 2005. Members of the Church have also accused Agré of important financial embezzlement: *24 Heures* May 27 and June 23, 2005.
- <sup>14</sup> On the troubles of 1999-2000, see Le Pape/Vidal 2002, *Politique africaine* 2000 and *Afrique contemporaine* 2000.
- <sup>15</sup> The phrases quoted in this chapter's headline are of a young Muslim student quoted in *Le Monde*, April 15, 1995.
- <sup>16</sup> See also Launay 1992 and Miran 2000.
- <sup>17</sup> See the relevant chapters in this book.
- <sup>18</sup> Launay/Miran 2000.
- <sup>19</sup> Conversation with Djiguiba Cissé, Abidjan, 8 September 2005.
- <sup>20</sup> For details, see Miran 1998.
- <sup>21</sup> This social profile of Wahhabis is typical of the savanna region (see for instance Amselle, 1985). In the forest regions of the Gulf of Guinea, Wahhabis tended to be less affluent and less educated (see Miran, 1998 for Côte d'Ivoire and Hiskett, 1980 for Ghana).
- <sup>22</sup> Conversations with Abdul Karim Cissé and Bachir Ouattara, Abidjan, September 13, 2005.
- <sup>23</sup> In 1959 and twice in 1963, Houphouët announced that attempted coups d'Etat had failed: the following repression allowed him to tighten his authoritarianism in a context of sub-regional political instability. Following a political opening in 1971, he then recognized that the plots had been mere fabrications.
- <sup>24</sup> Conversation with Abdoulaye Sangaré, Abidjan, October 10, 1996.
- <sup>25</sup> "Déclaration du Conseil Supérieur des Imams à la veille du référendum le 20 juillet 2000", in *Les Cahiers du CEID* [CNI], n°1, August 2000: 20-21.
- <sup>26</sup> See for instance Ba, 2000: 150. On Islam in the *ivoirité* era, see also Gary-Toukara 2005.
- <sup>27</sup> See for instance the document "Mémoire sur la laïcité de l'Etat en Côte d'Ivoire" prepared by a group of reformists around Aboubacar Fofana in 2002.
- <sup>28</sup> On Bouaké, see LeBlanc 1999.
- <sup>29</sup> Citer report de Ladjid Sidibé
- <sup>30</sup> Conversations with Djiguiba Cissé, Abidjan, September 10, 2005 and *Nord Sud*, October 21, 2005.
- <sup>31</sup> *Fraternité Matin*, February 17, 1998.
- <sup>32</sup> Conversation with Moussa Touré, Abidjan, September 14, 2001.
- <sup>33</sup> CIMEF 2001. See also Miran 2005.
- <sup>34</sup> Conversation with Moussa Touré, Abidjan, September 18, 2005.
- <sup>35</sup> See Miran 2002.
- <sup>36</sup> Ba 2000: 171.
- <sup>37</sup> *Le Patriote*, September 14, 2001 (the CNI statement is dated September 12).

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<sup>38</sup> See the US Department of State *Côte d'Ivoire, International Religious Freedom Reports* for 2002, 03 and 04 on the internet at <http://www.state.gov/>. On the war in Côte d'Ivoire, see also *Politique africaine* 2003 and *Afrique contemporaine* 2003.

<sup>39</sup> *Fraternité Matin*, January 9, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> "Retour à la paix durable en Côte d'Ivoire. Les Sunnites donnent les conditions", *Nord Sud*, September 9, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Conversation with Father Augustin Obrou, in charge of the *Forum des Confessions Religieuses* within the Catholic Church, Abidjan, September 13, 2005. The first public statement of the new *Collectif* appeared in the local press on September 26, 2005 (see for instance in *L'Inter*).

<sup>42</sup> Conversation with Innocent Tanon, vice general secretary of GERDDES, Abidjan, September 13, 2005.