



Cotonou

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SUSANA CALVO CAPILLA

Cotonou

The port city of **Cotonou** is the major urban centre and economic hub of the West African Republic of Benin (known as Dahomey until 1975), with 679,012 inhabitants in 2013 (14.2 percent were Muslim in 2002). Cotonou was a fishing settlement, tributary to the Danxome (the Fon etymon of Dahomey) kingdom (c. 1600–1894) before the gradual encroachment of the French; it was overshadowed by the older Porto-Novo, the colonial and now political capital, twenty-four kilometres to the east. From the 1850s through the colonial period, Porto-Novo (25.1 percent Muslim in 2002) was the epicentre of Muslim socio-political and intellectual life in this part of the Guinea Coast.

The number of Muslims in Cotonou, estimated at 300 in 1926, grew gradually by the immigration of migrant traders of Hausa, Nago (Yoruba of Oyo ancestry), Dendi, and other origins; native Fon converts to Islam were scarce. Each community tended to conserve its own Muslim and ethnic traditions. By mid-century, the Jonquet and Cadjèhoun mosques were the town's principal Islamic edifices.

After independence in 1960, the rapidly modernising Cotonou became the base for new nationwide Islamic associa-

tions, but these were still led mostly by the francophone Porto-Novian elite, bitterly divided between young self-designated “reformists” and supposedly less “rigorist” creoles descended from ex-slaves returned from Brazil. A series of coups d’état and the proclamation, in 1974, by Colonel Mathieu Kérékou (d. 2015, president of Benin from 1972 to 1991 and from 1996 to 2006) of the government’s adoption of Marxism-Leninism put on hold Muslim association life, which was resumed timidly after the political opening of 1983. Under the leadership of Yaaya Salouf Alihou, inspector general of the Commercial Bank of Benin, the Union Culturelle des Jeunes Musulmans du Dahomey (created in 1961) became the Organisation pour la Culture Islamique du Bénin (OCIB), whose aim was to educate Muslims, French-speakers in particular, through courses, conferences, and publications. The umbrella organisation Union Islamique du Bénin (UIB), led by the *imām* of the Jonquet mosque, followed suit in 1984 but was immediately hindered by internal divisions. With the support of the OCIB and the Saudi-based World Association of Muslim Youth, a new UIB-related Union de la Jeunesse Musulmane du Bénin was founded in 1989. Beyond supervising the pilgrimage to Mecca, however, the UIB settled into lethargy.

From 1990, the democratic opening, facilitated by a National Conference led by Archbishop Isidore de Souza (d. 1999), generated an increasingly visible religious renewal at the grassroots and national levels. The Association pour la Promotion de l’Islam au Bénin, the Cercle d’Études et de Recherche Islam et Développement, and the Union des Femmes Musulmanes du Bénin were amongst the many new Islamic organisations formed in 1990–1.

A Conférence Nationale des Associations Islamiques du Bénin (CONAIB-Shoura) was convened in 1992 to bring these initiatives together but came to a sudden end after the authority of its president, Dr Yacouba Fassassi, a former IMF executive and master of the Ni‘matallāhiyya (a Persian Šūfī order originating with Shāh Ni‘matallāh Walī, d. 834/1431, a Syrian-born mystical author), was contested. Meanwhile, many competing, foreign-based Islamic NGOs established themselves in Cotonou, notably the Saudi International Islamic Relief Organisation, the Kuwaiti Africa Muslim Agency, and the Libyan World Islamic Call Society (the latter built a free clinic and a huge mosque near the Dantokpa market).

Beginning in the 1980s, hundreds of Beninese graduates returned from Arab-Islamic universities, particularly the Islamic University in Medina. In contrast to northern towns such as Malanville, the influence of Salaff-oriented Ahl al-Sunna groups in Cotonou was limited, despite the presence of their main mosque in the Place de Bulgarie. Some Salafists drew closer to francophone Muslim students and intellectuals, who set up the Association Culturelle des Élèves et Étudiants Musulmans du Bénin (ACEEMUB) and the Amicale des Intellectuels Musulmans du Bénin (AIMB) in the early 2000s. Prominent in this Arabic- and French-speaking group was Kuwait-trained Mohamed Ibrahim al-Habib (b. 1958), who became *imām* of the central *zongo* mosque in 1999 (a *zongo* is an urban enclave of Hausas and, by extension, foreigners in general). Al-Habib succeeded his father, Wowo Ibrahim (known also as Malam Yaro, d. 2002), a leading *shaykh* of the Niass Tijāniyya (the branch that developed beginning in the 1940s around

Shaykh Ibrahim Niass, d. 1975; the original Tijāniyya was founded in Tlemcen in Algeria in 1195/1781 by the *shaykh* and religious scholar Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Tijānī, d. 1815, and became influential in much of North and West Africa and, later and to a lesser extent, in Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia). Although disciples of the (Ṣūfī) father eschewed the supposed Salafī inclinations of the son, coexistence prevailed between the disciples of the two. Soon thereafter, the *zongo* mosque was enlarged; a local Islamic radio station, “La Voix de l’Islam,” and a French newspaper, *Al-oumma al-islamia*, were launched; and a new Islamic federation, the Réseau des Associations et ONG (NGOs) Islamiques du Bénin, was founded in 2000. In 2002, this Réseau coordinated the second Colloque International des Musulmans de l’Espace Francophone (CIMEF), sponsored by the Swiss academic, philosopher, and writer Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962). Divisions later severely weakened Imām al-Habib’s group. Officially, the central *imām* of Cotonou remains the *imām* of the Jonquet mosque, who is also president of the UIB.

Cotonou is home to other Muslim communities: the Aḥmadiyya mission (a branch of the religious movement founded in Panjāb near the end of the nineteenth century, originating with the life and teachings of Mīrẓā Ghulām Aḥmad, d. 1908); the Tablīghī Jamā‘at (a global Sunnī Islamic missionary movement founded in 1927 in India by Muḥammad Ilyās Kandhlawī, d. 1944, and focused on urging Muslims to return to primary Sunnī Islam); and Shaykh Bentounes’s (b. 1949) ‘Alawiyya Ṣūfī order (founded by Shaykh Aḥmad ‘Alawī, d. 1934, in Algeria in 1914), amongst many others.

Al-Hadja Naïma Toukourou (b. c.1933), a wealthy businesswoman, disciple of Malam Yaro, and member from 2003 of the Lagos-based Yoruba NASFAT association (also known as Nasr Allah al-Fathi Society of Nigeria, or Nasrul-Lahi-l-Fatih Society of Nigeria, a Yoruba Muslim prayer-group founded in Lagos in 1995, now one of Nigeria’s most influential and dynamic religious groups), has built several mosques, including a huge one in her Fifadji neighbourhood in Akpakpa, Cotonou. Religious coexistence amongst Muslim, Christian, and *vodun* (voodoo) groups is largely peaceful, and the state-sponsored legal principle known as *laïcité* is not questioned.

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