

## PREFACE: THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF ISLAM IN BENIN

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The studies available on Islam in West Africa focus on the states of the Savanah and Sahel belt, i.e. in particular Niger, Burkina-Faso, Mali, Senegal and Northern Nigeria. Very few empirical studies have been carried out on Islam in the coastal states of West African, such as Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, as these countries are generally perceived as being dominated by local African religions or as Christian. Thus, the fact that the northern areas of these countries have been undergoing a rapid process of Islamization for decades is frequently overlooked. (However, this process of Islamization does not usually affect the number of Christians in these countries; indeed, an increase can be observed in the absolute and relative numbers of followers of both religions.) Particular deficits have existed hitherto with respect to research on Islam in Benin (formerly Dahomey); the only related study originates from 1926 and was compiled by an official of the French colonial administration (Paul Marty) against the background of the keen interest that the colonial administrations were developing at the time in "Pan-Islamism" and the "Islamic threat".

Thus, Galilou Abdoulaye's study fills a major empirical gap in the research. The focus of his analysis is a series of medium-sized towns in Northern Benin (in particular Djougou, Parakou and Malanville) and the political capital Porto-Novo in the south of the country, whose population has included a sizeable number of Muslims since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (demonstrating *en passant* that Islam in Benin is not an exclusively northern phenomenon). The development of Islam in Benin is embedded in more comprehensive societal dynamics and is associated in particular with the development of the education system, the dynamics of the labour market and the transformation of local elites. This provides the context for the rapid differentiation of the "Islamic field" in Benin. Thus, while the distinction between "Sufis" and "Islamists" cannot be expressed in terms of the traditionalist/modernist dichotomy, the current development of Islam in Benin cannot be reduced to a conflict between them. Trends broadly labelled as "Sufist" and "Islamist" divide in fact into diverse sub-groups: in addition to the traditional Tidjaniya and Qadiriya *turuq*, "neo-Sufi" groups, whose followers come from the educated urban middle classes, can also be found in Benin today and the reformist currents include not only the "Wahhabis" (who prefer to refer to themselves as Sunnites) supported by Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, on which journalistic observers tends to focus their attention exclusively, but also, for example, the Ahmadiyahs whose credo amounts to a "de-Arabization" of Islam.

The two most important *turuq* in Benin are the Qadiriya and the Tidjaniya which, up to a few decades ago, almost completely controlled the Islamic field there. While the Qadiriya is the older *tariqa* and dominated the Islam of 19<sup>th</sup> century Dahomey, today it is found only in Porto-Novo: in line with the general trend in Francophone West Africa, they have been overtaken by the Tidjaniya elsewhere

in the country since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Beninese Tidjaniya adopt the approach of the Senegalese Shaykh Niasse, placing a strong emphasis on recitative practices and mystic elements which are described in detail by Abdoulaye. Like all *turuq* it is organized in the form of a network around central individuals (i.e. their shaykhs, who have access to esoteric knowledge in addition to their Islamic scholarship and often assume the characteristics of saints) and displays a distinctively trans-ethnic and international character.

The differentiation within the educational system constitutes an important trend in Beninese Islam. Simple Qur'an schools continue to exist and are increasing in number throughout the country. These schools function on the basis of a local model of "placing in care" (*confiage*) of children, which also informs the apprenticeship system found all over West Africa: the children do not simply attend the Qur'an school for certain times of the day, but have the status of "foster children" for the Qur'an teacher and, like all children, can be enlisted for domestic and agricultural tasks and, in some areas of Benin, for religiously-motivated begging. This structural similarity with the apprenticeship system is also manifest in the institution of the *walima*, which constitutes the completion of the training and is similar to the *liberation* of apprentices. Moreover, in larger households there are many Qur'an schools in which the children are taught only for a short time in the evening or at week-ends, possibly along with neighbouring children, and attend the state schools during the day. The aim of these simple Qur'an schools is to teach the children Islamic rites and have them memorize (parts of) the Qur'an; they are dominated by orality and as a rule do not teach the Arabic language, nor do they provide a deeper understanding of the memorized texts. In fact, what is taught there is not only knowledge but, above all, in the interaction between teacher and pupil, a local Islamic *habitus*.

From the 1940s, various Islamic associations were established in Dahomey by a new generation of Muslims who were socialized initially in the *madaris* (plural of *madrasa*) of neighbouring countries, in particular Togo, and later also increasingly in the Islamic universities of the Arab world. Modern Islamic schools, at which the subjects found in modern Western schools were taught in addition to Islamic studies and Arabic and modern teaching methods applied, were established later in Benin than in the Islamic parts of the French colonial empire in West Africa. The minority Muslim middle classes (generally public servants) usually sent their children to the lay state schools; thus they only had a basic knowledge of Arabic. The first modern-style *madrasa* was not established until 1946 in Porto-Novo and was followed by the establishment of similar institutions in Djougou and Kandi. Thus, the *écoles arabes* in neighbouring Togo, which were run by Egyptian graduates of Al-Azhar University in Cairo and whose attraction lay moreover in the fact that they provided scholarships to their successful graduates to attend Islamic universities in Arab countries, played a more significant role in the creation of a Beninese Muslim intellectual class. These schools became the gateways to the reform tendencies in Beninese Islam, which were boosted by the increasing numbers of Beninese scholarship students attending universities in Arab countries. After 1961, the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia played a particularly prominent role in this development. Islamic universities were also later established in West Africa, first in Say (Niger), and then also in Benin itself in the late 1990s (*Institut de Langue Arabe et de Culture Islamique/ILACI*). The graduates of these insti-

tutions (who are known in Benin as *étudiants arabes* or *dawliu*) experienced significant difficulties in finding suitable employment outside of the Islamic milieu on their return to Benin as their degrees were not recognized by the Beninese state. Thus, the only option open to some of them was to enter into service at the increasing number of local *écoles arabes* as (often badly paid) teachers while others succeeded in obtaining more lucrative posts as representatives of Arab-Islamic NGOs.

Thus, from the 1970s an Islamic sub-milieu emerged in Benin – and above all in the north of the country – comprising young Muslim intellectuals who had been frustrated in their hopes of social advancement. This generation with its precarious economic situation, its strongly Wahhabi-influenced education, its shared experiential horizons, i.e. first in Benin and then also in the Arab universities, and its strong interpersonal connections views the religious practices of the older generation (which they describe as obscurantist) with enormous scepticism. However, it is the older generation that largely continues to control the opportunities for advancement within the Islamic milieu, for example to the imamate. Abdoulaye refers incisively here to a double *déclassement*, i.e. both in the context of Beninese society in general and within Islam. In my view, this observation is central to reaching an appropriately sociological understanding of so-called "Islamism" (which is often only perceived from the outside in terms of its hostile stance to the "West"). On the other hand, the *étudiants arabes* obtain socio-structural backing through the support they receive from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and from the fact that their role in the developing Islamic-Arab educational system provides them with their own clientele among the up-and-coming generation.

The dynamics of renewal in Beninese Islam are not, however, limited to the influence of Wahhabism. Also important is Ahmadiya, which concurs with Wahhabi-inspired reformism regarding the fact that the essential reform of Islam necessitates a return to the sources, but differs from it in certain doctrinal areas. But unlike Wahhabism, Ahmadiya has its headquarters outside of the Arab world (originally on the Indian subcontinent, now in London) and its missionary activity is strongly focused on the both cultural and linguistic "de-Arabization" of Islam. This missionary activity is accompanied by charitable and development-policy measures. In Benin, its main followers originate from the Francophone intellectual classes of the south and are particularly concentrated in Porto-Novo. Modernist Sufi tendencies also exist in conjunction with the Alawiya and the Ne'matullah; these groups also draw most of their followers from the Francophone intellectuals of the south. Finally, individual Shiites, graduates of the University of Qom in Iran, can also be found in Northern Benin. The fact that there are Shiites in the country at all is due to a biographical coincidence whereby the current leaders of this small group submitted a series of scholarship applications to the Middle East in the 1970s which only met with success in Iran. However, their scope for missionary activity is limited by the fact that they do not receive any material support from Iran.

Two central social strategies of the *étudiants arabes* consist in "development brokerage" and in the demonopolization of the Arabic language. Adopting a category from political and development anthropology, Abdoulaye describes the emerging phenomenon of the "Islamic development broker" in Benin based on the case of a Kuwaiti NGO (*Agence Musulmane d'Afrique/Action Directe-AMA/AD*). This *rent-seeking* by the young Arabizing elite can be understood as the direct

continuation of an old practice – the submission of appeals to wealthy members of the Islamic community for the financing of individual (religious) projects – and, moreover, links up seamlessly with a general societal context in Benin which is characterized by a high level of institutionalized dependency on development aid. The *étudiants arabes* benefit here from the social relations and language skills acquired in the Arab countries. In the absence of other opportunities for making use of their education, many *étudiants arabes* focus their hopes on achieving social betterment as representatives of Arab-Islamic NGOs (thereby basically adopting the same strategy as many of Benin's non-Muslim university graduates). In Benin, these organizations usually originate in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait or Qatar. Abdoulaye views the establishment of *madaris (écoles arabes)* as a strategy of the *étudiants arabes* to rid Arabic of the aura of esoteric knowledge which was attributed to it by the old Islamic elite. The demonopolization of the Arabic language and its establishment as a general medium of communication among Muslims would undermine this old Islamic elite and reinforce the position of the *étudiants arabes*. However, the uncertain career prospects of the graduates impose limits on the expansion of Arabic-Islamic education, in particular in urban areas, thus the pupils of the *madaris* increasingly originate from rural areas; the city of Djougou in the Northwest of Benin constitutes an exception in this regard.

Benin's Islamic milieu was shaken by a number of serious conflicts in recent years. It was not unusual for these conflicts to be resolved using physical violence, and even loss of life, and they always concerned the problem of the succession to the imamate in the large local Friday mosques. Over the centuries, a local model of the imamate had developed in what is now Benin whereby the regulation of succession was based on the same principle as that of the traditional chieftaincy, i.e. the principle of genealogical succession. Thus, the local imamates became the "property" of selected lineages. This model is strongly criticized today by the reformists. The case studies presented in detail by Abdoulaye reveal the multifaceted nature of the resulting conflicts which revolve not only around symbolic capital, e.g. doctrinal differences, but also, to a significant extent, around the economic resources associated with the office of imam. (Which is why, as is usual in situations involving political conflict in Benin, the protagonists of these conflicts accuse each other not only of apostasy, but often also of corruption.) Furthermore, these conflicts are always linked with political interests and strategies outside of the Islamic field. This emerges most clearly from the fascinating example of the conflicts in Malanville on the border to Nigeria and Niger where Islam, political party conflicts, ethnic conflicts, the attempts by local representatives of the Beninese state to intervene in the area of religion and the economic rise of a young elite of traders with strong links with northern Nigeria are very closely intertwined. These conflicts are predominantly generational in nature – which is also unsurprising in an African context. Thus, the fact that the opponents in the conflicts between different Islamic movements are often close relatives – sometimes even fathers and sons – can heighten or attenuate the conflict, depending on the context. The phenomenon of segmentation familiar from other societal areas in Africa constitutes a common type of conflict resolution: the internal Islamic opposition supported by local or foreign patrons is opening its own Friday mosques, either peacefully (as in Djougou) or against the background of a long drawn-out conflict (as was the case in Parakou and Malanville). In other cases (as in Porto-Novo), the

young generation is not strong enough to seriously threaten the position of the older one. The regulation of succession in the large mosque of Zongo in Cotonou represents a particularly interesting example of the ambivalent relationship between cultural tradition and innovation: the old Imam here preferred to chose his son as his successor despite the fact that the latter is a committed reformist, thereby keeping the imamate in the family. In fact, all of the examples of conflict surrounding the succession of imams presented by Abdoulaye show that while opposing logics compete on the discursive level, in reality those pretenders who can combine a capital consisting of family relations with a capital of Islamic knowledge have the best prospects of success.

The same segmentation tendencies also underlie the development of the country's Islamic organizations. An organization representing the entire Muslim community of the country existed only temporarily in the form of the *Union Islamique du Bénin* (UIB, founded in 1984) under pressure of the Marxist-Leninist regime. Internal conflicts re-erupted immediately on the demise of the regime in 1989, the UIB descended into a state of lethargy in many parts of the country and competing organizations were established. Thus, the organizational structures of the Islamic milieu are subject to the segmentation tendencies that also characterize other social fields in Benin (for example, Protestantism, the party-political landscape and the business sector).

Abdoulaye's study demonstrates just how productive an analysis of contemporary Islam based on the perspective of the sociology of conflict and using the methods of social anthropology can be by identifying and demonstrating the heterogeneity and poly-centrism of the "Islamic field". Emic notions of the "Islamic community" (*umma*) and purely text-oriented studies tend to conceal this propensity for conflict. Thus, Galilou Abdoulaye's study deserves to attract the attention not only of anthropology, but also of Islamic studies and it will be particularly interesting to observe the reaction this study triggers in the very social field it examines.