

# Beninese Muslims

## Population and ethnic composition

Having gained its independence from France in 1960, the country was first known as the Republic of Dahomey until 1974, then as the People's Republic of Benin until 1989, and has been known as the Republic of Benin since 1990. Home to multiple ethnic groups and religious beliefs, Benin has been a cosmopolitan structure for the past two centuries in particular. Nevertheless, as with many Sub-Saharan countries, there is no precise data as to the demographic composition of Benin. Due to the fact that censuses are only made every 25-30 years and that these ignore many criteria, Benin's ethnic composition and the proportion of each ethnicity is ambiguous. The manipulation of the peoples of Africa by European powers who drew the borders of these countries for their own benefit and without regard to the ethnic, religious and historic composition of the continent emerges as another factor that feeds this ambiguity. For example, while countries like Mali, the Central African Republic and Nigeria have witnessed obvious "demographic games" until recently, the ideological manipulations of the West have been imposed on censuses for an even longer period.

According to the last census, Benin's population, which is estimated to be 9.6 million, is made up of 42% Christians (27% Catholic, 5% Celestial Church of Christ, which believes Jesus Christ to be the one and only God, 5% Methodist, 3% Evangelist and 2% Mormon), while 25% are Muslims, 17% practice the indigenous Vodun religion, and 6% are believers of other indigenous religions. Even though there are sources claiming that indigenous religions are more widespread than Christianity and Islam, the general consensus is as has been described. While Sunnis constitute the majority of the Muslims living in the country, there is a Shiite community as well making up 0.5% who came from around Lebanon for commercial reasons. The Muslim population is concentrated mostly in the north of the country, generally making a living from agriculture and animal husbandry. There are about 5,000 Togolese political refugees, mostly Muslims, currently living in Benin.

While French is the official language of the country, indigenous languages make their presence felt in daily life, revealing the diverse ethnic composition. Among these are Fon (24%), Yoruba (8%), Bariba (7.9%), Pulaar-Peul (6%), Goun (5.5%), Adja (4%), Ayizo (3.9%), Nago (3%), Gen (2.1%), and Ditamari (2%). Even though the capital of the country is Porto-Novo, governmental and commercial institutions are concentrated in the largest city, Cotonou. Borgou, Ouémé, Parakou and Malanville are among the country's most important cities. The majority of Muslims living in southern Benin belong to the Yaruba family. While Muslims make up 14.2% of the population in Cotonou and 25.1% in Porto-Novo, in the north, for example along the border with Niger, the percentage can go up to 94%.

## The Arrival of Islam

Vodun, which is basically a type of paganism that attributes holiness to animals, and other indigenous religions, are attested as having been practiced in the area prior to the arrival of Islam. Islam began to spread in the area in a very early period through the trade colonies established in the Songhai region of the Mali Empire in the 8th century. These relations that began on a commercial note set the stage for the establishment of a Muslim community when local leaders converted to Islam and Muslim traders who came to the area married local women.

Another factor that facilitated the spread of Islam in Benin was the conquest of the northern Songhai State by the Moroccans. When, following the conquest, the Muslims living in Mali settled in the north of Benin, the spread of Islam in the region was catalyzed. The Dendi ethnic group living today in Benin are descendants of these Muslims who arrived from Songhai. The Dendi, who live and engage in trade in Parakou, Djougou and Nikki, have, still to this day, maintained their relations with the Hausa who occupy a region that covers Niger and Mali and with whom they have a major linguistic and cultural interaction. The Gurma, Mokole and Gando tribes also present in the north of the country are among the communities which rapidly accepted Islam after the Songhai trade colonies. In the area called W National Park (Parc National du W), Muslims account for up to 81% of the population.

Living in Benin's central areas and occupying some of the north, the originally pastoralist Pulaar, also

called the Peul, migrated from the north and northeast into the country's interior and over time became a major Muslim community in the area (the Pulaar live in dispersed groups across a wide area stretching from Senegal to Central Africa). The Bariba, who became predominantly Muslim thanks to migrations from the north, completely embraced Islam in the 19th century. One of the largest tribes living in the south, the Yoruba, also chose to convert to Islam in this period. The hermitages established by religious leaders with Sufi affiliations who arrived from Nigeria and Togo also made a significant contribution to the spread of Islam in the south. Between 1961-1992, the proportion of Muslims in the country rose from 13% to 20.6%. Although not certain, there are estimates claiming that the number rose to about 30% in the 2000s. In 1983, Benin joined the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

There is no precise information on the current state of Muslim historical heritage sites and Islamic artifacts found in the region. News of some of them having been transported to France to be kept in museums during the colonial era are reported in the national and international media. However, reports offering tangible data on this subject are still needed.

### **Denominations and religious orders**

Muslims living in Benin, like in other parts of Western Africa, belong to the Maliki branch of Islam. Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya are the principal and most well-established Sufi orders in the country. Due to the French government's intervention on religious publications during the colonial period, and due as well to interaction resulting from the multicultural composition of the country, it can be observed that ignorance and confusion reign in society. It has become commonplace that Islamic and Vodun rituals are practiced together in the Beninese Islamic community, where such fundamental concepts of Islam as trade ethics and jihad do not find complete acceptance. A culture has emerged in the country where Vodun traditions are perpetuated by both Muslims and Christians. Exalted as "inter-religious dialogue" by Western countries, this situation is in fact a sign that religious education in the country has not been conducted correctly. Mostly in southern areas, the movement known as Ahmadiyya, or Qadianiyya, based in the UK and India, has been recruiting followers since 1960. Thanks to foreign funding, members of this order have built the largest mosque in Benin. The Nimatollahi and Alawiyya orders stand out as two new Sufi orders that have been growing recently, especially in Porto-Novo. It is interesting to note that Yacoubou Fassassi, the representative of the Nimatollahi order in Benin, is also a high-ranking executive in the World Bank. Wahhabism and Salafism, on the other hand, are not widespread in Benin, and the well-established orders mentioned above have been cited as reasons for this situation. Boko Haram and other violent groups known as the Al-Qaeda of the Maghreb have not been able to establish themselves in Benin either, but armed groups affiliated with these have been trying to infiltrate the country from the north. This sometimes puts Beninese Muslims at a disadvantage. The Union of Beninese Muslim Communities frequently asks the government not to tolerate these violent groups and to block them.

### **Economy**

In Benin, where, as in the other member states of the West African Economic and Monetary Union, the Franc CFA is the official currency, the economy depends mostly on agriculture, animal husbandry, tourism and trade. Industrial production (mostly textiles and chemical products) constitutes 13-14% of the country's economy. It has achieved an average growth rate of nearly 5% in the last decade. The primary agricultural products include African palm oil, maize, cotton, pearl millet, rice and, although not much, cocoa, coffee, tobacco and flax. Fishing is also an important source of income in coastal areas. The most important trading partners of Benin are China, France, India, the USA, Niger, Nigeria, Indonesia and Thailand. The country receives the largest amount of development aid from France. This gives France a great deal of leverage in the country's politics. The major source of income for Muslims is agriculture-animal husbandry and trade to a limited degree. Engaging in tourism and trade in the south in Porto-Novo and Cotonou, Christians constitute the richest portion of the population. Because growth in Benin is not balanced, the economic gap between Christians and Muslims is widening by the day. It is imperative that development aid received from institutions such as the Islamic Development Bank and the African Development Bank reach the north of the country and get used to implementing economic projects in the area for balanced and fair development.

### **Education**

Ruled by a socialist regime between the years 1975-1992, education in Benin is conducted by the state. However, the insufficient number of schools limits access to education, especially in areas populated by

Muslims. Therefore the national illiteracy rate of 63% (expected to be reduced to the targeted rate of 50% in 2015) is higher among Muslims. Beninese Catholics have access to both religious and basic education at private schools established in the country by the Vatican and some EU states. Those who study in these schools can hold influential positions in state administration and bureaucracy. Muslims are generally educated at Quranic schools called *da'ara*. In addition to learning how to read the Quran, at the *da'ara* students receive the basics of Islamic catechism. However, as there is no public school or education center offering secondary education in many areas populated by Muslims, young Beninese Muslims cannot receive education of this kind. The lack of Islamic high school education – known in Turkey as *imam-hatip* – is felt in the country. Considering the higher involvement of Christians in politics, it can be observed that this insufficiency creates negative outcomes for Muslims in terms of shaping administrative staffing patterns and social transformation. There are some centers of education in the south, called “Franco-Arabic schools”, which provide both religious and middle school level formal education. However, due to the limited number of these schools, funded by countries such as Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where education is provided in French and Arabic, they are not very effective.

In the *madrasahs* founded by Sufi orders, primarily the Tijaniyya and the Qadiriyya, religious education of a more advanced nature, such as *fiqh* and *hadith*, is provided. Such institutions are continuing to increase in number across the country. Established again by these orders, “assemblies” or “circles” of wisdom (*ilim*) provide opportunities for more advanced Islamic education than what is offered at the *madrasahs*. In addition to teaching advanced Arabic and Islamic exegesis, these assemblies transmit Sufi doctrines by means of such texts as the *Maqamat*, *Diwan* and *Risala*. There is, in addition, an elite group who receive education in Islamic sciences in Saudi Arabian or Egyptian universities and develop an affinity for Wahhabism. There are heated discussions between this elite group and the Tijaniyya.

Another outstanding characteristic of education here is the military and ideological training conducted in the name of the nation-state of Benin. Everyone in the country, including women, must complete 18 months of military service.

### **Religious freedoms**

There is no legal restriction on Muslim worship in Benin. A liberal environment in accordance with the diversity of religions in the country is provided by the constitution and other legislation. In virtually all parts of the country, *salah* can be performed without disturbance. As part of its commitment to secularism, the state of Benin provides funding for the building of mosques and for other relevant services. Mosques in the country have been built with the support of wealthy Muslim merchants (such as benefactors of Yoruba ethnicity) or support from Kuwait. Mosque expenses are covered by their congregations. Islamic occasions such as Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and the birthday of Prophet Muhammad are official holidays.

As in other predominantly non-Muslim countries of Western and Central Africa, Muslims in Benin also commonly call their children names belonging to other cultures in order to protect them from social problems.

There is no legal restriction on the establishment and maintenance of NGOs by Muslims. Among the Islamic NGOs active in the country are the Benin Islamic Union, Conference of Islamic Associations of Benin, Union of Muslim Women of Benin, Union of Islamic Associations, Islamic Community for Development and Solidarity, Benin Society for Islamic Dawah and Expansion, Ibadur-Rahman Association, Labyra Muslim Organization, Islamic Path Association, Youth Council for Social Reform and Islamic Preaching, Cotonou Ansar al-Islam, International Committee for Spreading Islamic Living-Benin Branch (CIERI), Benin Association for Revival and Preservation of Islamic Heritage, and the Society for Beninese Muslim Cooperation. In addition to development and welfare activities, these organizations are also active in areas such as education and health. It is pointed out that, despite the presence of these NGOs, non-governmental activity in Benin is not influential, and that NGO activities are usually implemented through congregations.

### **Political life**

Having gained its independence during the period of decolonization in the 1960s, Benin adopted a multi-party system in the 1990s after periods of Marxist-Leninist dictatorship and the Dahomey Republic. A parliamentary republic, the country has a president who acts both as head of state and head of

government. Even though Union Makes the Nation (L'Union fait la Nation), the Social Democratic Party (Parti Social-Démocrate), Renaissance Party of Benin (Parti de la Renaissance du Bénin) and Democratic Renewal Party (Parti du Renouveau Démocratique) are known as the major political parties of the country, the current President Boni Yayi was elected in 2006 as an independent candidate thanks to support from minor parties. A former executive of the West African Development Bank, Boni Yayi attracts attention as having been born into a Muslim family, but having converted later to Evangelical Christianity. Having implemented fundamental changes in Benin since 2006, when he won the election with 53% of the vote, Yayi established a more democratic political environment in the country in comparison to earlier periods. Nevertheless, bribery, slavery, human trafficking, piracy, and the illegal drug trade continue to be major issues in the country. Without doubt, it is in the impoverished northern regions of Benin where the effects of these problems are felt most intensely. There is no restriction on the establishment of a political party by Muslims, provided that they do not “cause damage” to the principle of secularism.

The testimonies of Beninese Muslims verify the information provided in relevant texts stating that the Yayi period has been one of liberty, where no violation of the freedom of religion has been recorded. Represented by the Head of the Benin Islamic Union, Imam Sanni, Imam of the Natitingou Central Mosque, Karim Da Silva, and Representative of the High Islamic Council, Kamer ad-Din, the Islamic Community supports the Yayi government in many respects (sometimes against the criticisms of the Catholic Church). It is also worth noting that these Muslim leaders take every opportunity to voice their commitment to secularism. The Benin government draws up a budget of 1 million dollars to be distributed among religious communities in proportion to their numbers (or current data). High-ranking state or government executives attend celebrations or receptions held in honor of religious occasions. Muslims have the opportunity to receive a small amount of financial support from the state to be able to perform their duty of pilgrimage. Islamic (interest-free) banks founded in Western Africa by Gulf capital also serve Beninese Muslims.

But in Benin, where freedom of religion and worship is protected by the constitution, the number of Muslims in the cabinet and in parliament is highly insufficient. This is clearly an outcome of sociocultural conditions. There is no systematic/conscious policy of alienation, marginalization, or deportation targeting the Muslims in the country. However, it is necessary to note that, though not commonly, Muslims face racism at times in the form of exceptional situations and isolated incidents. The deportation of three Congolese preachers on the grounds that they were Islamists who supported terrorism is an example of such incidents which have stirred up debates. This shows that the system of secularism is sensitive toward Islamism, and that political grounds for restricting/oppressing Muslims can be gained using anti-Islamic discourse. The fact that such incidents have been caused by the discourse of the “War on Terror” since 9/11 has kept Muslims away from making petitions that would associate them with Islamism/political Islam.

## Conclusion

In terms of socioeconomic and sociocultural differences, a gap emerges between the poor northern regions populated mostly by Muslims and the richer southern regions populated mostly by followers of other religions. Problems relating to education, healthcare and hunger, experienced by the poor sections of the country’s population, affect the Muslim population mostly. According to many in administrative positions, the multicultural composition of the country requires a “dialogue” based on mutual respect between distinct ethnicities. In an effort to avoid political damage, the government refrains from acting in a could lead to contradiction and reaction. There is a clear possibility of this situation changing in a totalitarian regime, for example under the administration of a junta. Indeed, Muslims had a harder time during the Marxist-Leninist era.

Even though the general picture is as it has been described, more in-depth studies and fieldwork are necessary to obtain more precise information on the situation of Beninese Muslims. One of the most important shortcomings suffered by the Muslims living in Western Africa is the absence of and their consequent inability to benefit from the Islamic scholarly, academic work and intellectual heritage which is available in other parts of the Islamic world. Foreign interventions aside, a problem in mentality is clearly at the heart of humanitarian crises in Africa. It is not far-fetched to say that as with other countries of Western Africa, intellectual accumulation and experience will eradicate many problems in Benin.

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