

Pope Christophe XVIII and La Très Sainte Église de Jésus-Christ, Mission de Banamè in Benin



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Introduction

In 2009 Mathias Vigan (b. 1967) had been a Roman Catholic parish priest in the village of Banamè in south-eastern Benin for five years. In January that year, he met a young woman named Vicentia Tadagbé Tchranvoukinni (b. 1990/1992), whom he exorcised. As she went through the deliverance process over several weeks, she assumed a new name, Parfaite, claiming increasingly potent charismatic powers and supreme wisdom. Soon, she asserted that she was nobody else than God the Holy Spirit–Dieu Saint-Esprit–also referring to herself as Daagbo, a word in the Fon language underlining age and experience: the patriarch of patriarchs. Still, in her case, ‘Daagbo’ was equivalent with God.

Daagbo saw it as her End Time mission to extirpate “witchcraft”–*sorcellerie* and to crush the Devil’s power; to purify and renew the Catholic Church; and to create peace and prosperity, saving humanity from eternal damnation. Still, she was not the only person in Banamè claiming a supernatural status. By her side was another young woman, Nicole Soglo (b. 1992), whom Daagbo asserted to be the representative of the Virgin Mary on earth: Nanyé Nicole. Mathias Vigan believed in Daagbo’s claims and took an active part in the mission. He became part of the growing Mission of Banamè.

The supernatural claims and the promises of cures and protection against evil spirits attracted an increasing number of pilgrims to the village. Most were Roman Catholics, and as a result, the movement was denounced by the diocesan bishop. In 2011, Daagbo founded a separate church, but in her view, it was nothing new, but the One True Catholic Church, founded by her son Jesus Christ. Eventually, in late 2012 she made Mathias Vigan pope providing him with the pontifical name Christophe XVII, and with time the pope, too, received an increasingly divine status as another Jesus.

During its relatively brief existence, the church has used several more or less formal names. Currently, the official designation is La Très Sainte Église de Jésus-Christ, Mission de Banamè–The Most Holy Church of Jesus Christ, Banamè Mission. For short, I will refer to it as the Church of Banamè, and when referring to the adherents, I use the conventional designation: Daagbovis, that is, children of Daagbo.

The Church of Banamè has printed few texts, and very little if anything is available in research libraries. Still, much documentation can be found on-line. They had an official website between 2013 and 2019, but there were few updates in the last two years. Though it has been closed down, it is possible still possible to consult cached versions. From 2017 onwards, the church's online presence is mainly constituted by several Facebook groups and a YouTube channel: BanamèTV. The official sites include stories about the background of the church and its mission, doctrinal messages, interviews with key actors, sermons, reports on church activities, and press releases.

Most of the YouTube videos are recorded during the church's most important pilgrimages and comprises long teaching sessions by Daagbo as well as the pope's sermons. There are also interviews with Daagbo, Nanyé Nicole and Pope Christophe. Most of them, however, are long monologues. In short, much of the theological material is oral.¹ Apart from the official internet resources; there are websites and YouTube channels, where adherents publish official texts, summaries of Daagbo's teachings and video recordings. Their contents overlap the material found on the official websites.²

To study the Church of Banamè and its place in society, I also use news media from Benin and the neighbouring countries. The press material includes feature articles about the church and its development. Still, above all, they focus on contemporary controversies, including clashes between Daagbovis and members of other religious groups, as well as news on the church's relations with the Beninese political leadership, not least the president of the republic.

The earlier research on the Church of Banamè is minimal. The most substantial work so far is Emmanuelle Kadya Tall's article "Dieu, le Pape et la Sainte Vierge: Un mouvement de contestation de l'Église Catholique au Bénin" (2015). There, she analyses the church's development until 2014, placing it in a broader political and religious context. In his overview of alternative popes and

¹ The older web site of Eglise Catholique de Jésus-Christ, Sainte Colline de Banamè (2013–2017): www.sovidji.org. The newer webpage (2017–2019): www.baname.top. Both can be consulted through www.archive.org. Cf. www.facebook.com/baname and Youtube BanameTV channel: www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIsdmghNng0. The last two were launched in 2017. In this report, all translations from French to English are mine.

² Dieu Esprit-Saint au Bénin: www.dieu-esprit-saint-au-benin.blogspot.com; La Prophetie est D'évent Nous: www.ebenezaobe.e-monsite.com; and Holy Spirit Benin YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/channel/UC9UfVmfD_Km-S59qmsUdNkg.

sedevacantism, “Quand le pape n’est plus à Rome: antipapes et sédévacantistes” (2013), Jean-Francois Mayer studies the early development of the Church of Banamè and the election of Pope Christophe. Moreover, a few authors mention the church briefly in works on the religious situation in Benin and West Africa at large.³

The Early Banamè Movement and the Beninese Context

The history of what would become the Church of Banamè began in early 2009. At that time, 42-year-old Mathias Vigan was a priest in the parish of Sainte-Odile of Banamè which forms part of the Roman Catholic diocese of Abomey. He had been ordained eight years before, and the bishop had recently appointed him an official exorcist. In that capacity, Vigan was visited by many people who thought they were possessed by demons, or, more frequently, they came together relatives who believed that demons afflicted their family members. Belief in and fear of evil spirits and witchcraft is prevalent in Beninese society, and many religious activities are focused on the protection against evil powers.

On January 20, 2009, Vigan met Vicentia Tadagbé Tchranvoukinni for the first time, an encounter which would have very far-reaching consequences. She was about 16 years old at the time.⁴ There are at least two very different accounts of her background. One is based on public records and outsiders’ testimonies. The other is her own account that has become a central part of the Church’s foundational story.

The outsider reports tell a story about a complicated and increasingly problematic childhood and adolescence. According to a well-researched article in *L’Événement Précis* Vicentia Tadagbé Tchranvoukinni was born in Sakété in south-eastern Benin. Public records establish her year of birth to 1990, but according to herself, it was in 1992. At an early age, she left home and moved to an uncle in Porto-Novo, the capital of Benin, which is located on the Atlantic

³ Mayer 2013 and Tall 2015; cf. Mayrargue 2014: 96, Lademann-Priemer 2015: 46–47, and Koovi 2018: 219–220.

⁴ “Interview du Pape Christophe XVIII sur les débuts de la mission de Banamè”, on BanameTV: www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIismghNng0.

coast. According to testimonies from her old teachers, at that she was a timid girl with good grades. That changed when she moved to Abomey-Calavi, a suburb of Cotonou as a teenager. There she lived together with her aunt, and her school results were dwindling. She suffered from several illnesses, including partial paralysis and eating disorders, which her relatives interpreted as signs of demonic affliction.⁵

In January 2009, she was brought to see Mathias Vigan, who performed exorcisms on several occasions. According to reports by her followers, after two weeks of prayer and deliverance sessions, she was transformed and began to claim that she received private revelations, that she was free from sin and that she had many charismatic gifts. At that time, she started to call herself Parfaite, the perfect one. Father Vigan became convinced of the veracity of her testimonies, and her teachings attracted an increasing number of people in search of cures and protection against evil spirits. In this early period, many Roman Catholic priests and sisters, too, made the pilgrimage to Banamè and experienced miracles.⁶

According to the church's teaching, Parfaite gradually understood her identity and mission. Finally, on Good Friday, March 17, 2009, after having received a message from the Virgin Mary, she asserted that she was God the Holy Spirit (Dieu Esprit-Saint).⁷ She also referred to herself as Daagbo is a word in the Fon language, meaning the 'elder of elders', which is a title also used by some Vodun priests, whom she saw as the main enemies of her mission. According to her usage, however, it means God. In a later and more refined version of the story, through Parfaite, God the Holy Spirit *pris la chair* Banamè already on November 18, 1992.

In French, the expression is used in the Nicene Creed when confessing the incarnation: *il a pris chair de la Vierge Marie, et s'est fait homme* [*Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine, et homo factus est*]. In English, the words are usually translated as 'was incarnate' or 'took flesh.' Still, as the Church of Banamè believes that Daagbo was not incarnated but is pure spirit, a more

⁵ *L'Événement Précis*, April 11, 2014, cf. *Ouvertures: Le Temps de Citoyen*, December 12, 2012.

⁶ "Interview du Pape Christophe XVIII sur les débuts de la mission de Banamè", BanameTV: www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIismghNng0.

⁷ *L'Événement Précis*, April 11, 2014.

accurate translation might be that Daagbo ‘took over’ or ‘filled’ the ‘receptacle’ that is Parfaite. That also meant that she started her mission on earth, governing it from Banamè. However, she did not understand that this had happened until after being released from the demonic afflictions in 2009.⁸

In this context, the use of personal pronouns is a complicated matter. According to the Banamè doctrine, God the Holy Spirit is masculine. He is the Creator of Heaven and Earth. At the same time, Parfaite is female, while Daagbo is male, though in feminine appearance, being ‘housed’ in Parfaite. Today, Daagbo speaks about Parfaite using pronouns as ‘she’ and ‘her’, but only use “I”, ‘Daagbo’ or ‘God’ to refer to the divine self. However, in her message to Parfaite on Good Friday in 2009, the Virgin Mary made clear that according to God’s choice, He indeed, appeared as a woman, though He was pure spirit, not incarnated.

According to Daagbo’s teachings, she was not born the natural way. God, the Holy Spirit created her in Heaven as a ‘receptacle’ or ‘tabernacle’ for Himself. Three days later, on November 13, 1992, Parfaite came to earth with the help of an archangel. She arrived in the bushlands of Bérékére in central Benin. On November 18, a shepherd by the name of Parfait found the baby girl. First, the shepherd and his wife took care of her, but half a year later, she was adopted by a childless couple from the southern part of the country who worked in Bérékére at the time. They gave her the name Vicentia.⁹

Already in October 2008, three months before meeting the young woman who later would proclaim that she was Daagbo, Mathias Vigan exorcised Nicole Soglo, an adolescent who suffered from poor eyesight. After Daagbo became aware of her divinity, she declared that the young girl was the Representative of Our Lady on Earth: Nanyé Nicole. She has an integral part in Daagbo’s mission as the woman who would ‘step on the serpent’s head,’ that is, crush the Devil’s power.¹⁰

⁸ “Dieu Esprit-Saint pris chair” on www.sovidji.org; and Message, November 18, 2017 on www.facebook.com/missionbaname.

⁹ “Interview du Pape Christophe XVIII sur les débuts de la mission de Banamè”, on BanameTV: www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIsmghNng0. Cf. “Dieu Esprit-Saint pris chair” on www.sovidji.org.

¹⁰ “Propos de Nanyé Nicole à l’occasion de la Nativité du Christ à Wokou”, December 2017, BanamèTV: www.youtube.com/channel/UCOYQAEIi5ctnT0Z5pkO_CKg.

Together with Daagbo and Nanyé Nicole, Mathias Vigan promoted a growing religious movement focused on deliverance and healing with its centre in Banamè. Not surprisingly, when hearing about the large crowds coming to the village and the very unorthodox belief system, the local Roman Catholic authorities reacted. On November 7, 2009, the bishop of Abomey, Eugène Cyrille Houndékan (b. 1960), publicly denounced the group, which he referred to as a ‘deviant sect.’ Initially, he removed Vigan from the parish and entrusted him with another congregation, but he returned almost immediately. In early 2010, church authorities tried to transfer him to France, but he was soon back in Banamè, continuing the mission together with Daagbo and Nanyé Nicole.¹¹

From the very beginning onwards, Daagbo’s mission was threefold. The first part is to destroy the power of Satan–Béelzébul–and all sorcery. According to her vocabulary, *la sorcellerie* should not only be chased away but burnt to a cinder–*pas seulement chassé, mais calciné*–using powerful spiritual warfare. The second part was to cleanse the Roman Catholic Church from freemasons, sorcerers and other forces of evil. The ultimate goal of the mission is to create peace on earth.¹²

To Daagbo, it was evident that the Catholic Church needed renewal, and the clergy should be replaced, as they did not act against sorcery, but turned a blind eye or was an active part of it. Daagbo taught that Rome was the city of death, while Banamè and especially the sacred hill there–La Sainte Colline de Sovidji–was the city of life and the centre of the True Church. It was the New Jerusalem and the City of the Heavenly Court–La Cité de la Cour Céleste–where God is present in a most concrete way.¹³

The Church of Banamè asserted that pilgrimages to the Sainte Colline gave immunity against sorcery and evil spirits; the Daagbovis were ‘vaccinated against witchcraft.’ They claim to be able to demolish witchcraft and evil, heal all kinds of diseases and even resurrect dead people. They also think that the church’s mission will reduce poverty, lower the number of road accidents and

¹¹ *L’Événement Précis*, April 11, 2014. Cf. “Déclaration de la Conférence Episcopale du-Benin sur la secte dénommée “église catholique privée de Banamè”, January 28, 2013, published in *La Nouvelle Tribune*, February 2, 2013.

¹² “Mission de Dieu Esprit Saint en chair” on www.sovidji.org.

¹³ “Interview with Daagbo: L’Église Catholique Roman et Banamè” on BanamèTV: www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIismghNng0.

provide education to the Beninese population, just to mention but a few of their claims.¹⁴

It is no exaggeration to say that Vodun has a significant influence on Beninese society. For many, *sorcellerie* has neutral or at least ambiguous connotations. For them, it includes both benevolent and dangerous powers. For others, it is a decidedly negative concept, and the practices are looked upon as satanism. According to Douglas J. Falen, Beninese Vodun beliefs and practices include four salient aspects.

- 1) A recognition of the influence of ancestors and spirits of nature in people's success and misfortune,
- 2) Possession ceremonies honoring the deities,
- 3) A sophisticated divination system predicting one's fate and the will of the spirits, and
- 4) The use of animal sacrifice and the offering of food and drink to thank the deities or to persuade them to take favorable action on one's behalf.¹⁵

Beliefs and practices that are called Vodun have deep roots in Benin, and developed through outside contacts, co-existing with colonial rule. However, Christian missionaries have increasingly tried to counteract their practices and beliefs.¹⁶

The territory of Benin, until 1975 known as Dahomey, was, and is, made up of several different ethnolinguistic groups. The biggest is Fon, while other numerous groups are Adja and Yoruba. In the seventeenth century, the Fon Kingdom of Dahomey centred in Abomey gradually came to dominate the southern parts of the country establishing Vodun as a kind of state religion. The area also became a centre for the transatlantic slave trade dominated by the Portuguese in collaboration with the locals, though many other European countries were involved, too. In the 1890s, Dahomey became part of French West Africa and would remain so until the late 1950s. During this period the

¹⁴ Falen 2016.

¹⁵ Falen 2016: 255.

¹⁶ Falen 2016.

Catholic missionary activities began in earnest. Still, the vast majority of the inhabitants did not embrace the religion of the colonizers.¹⁷

Dahomey gained full independence from the French in 1960, and the first three post-independence decades were politically turbulent. In the 1960s, military coups followed on each other at a rapid pace, but through a coup in 1972, Mathieu Kérékou (1933–2015) became the head of state remaining in power for almost two decades. In 1975, he transformed Dahomey into the Marxist-Leninist People’s Republic of Benin, counting with the support of the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries. Not surprisingly, the ideological turn implied both a passive and active opposition against religion, not least Vodun, but also different Christian groups. Still, during periods the leader had some proclivity towards Islam.¹⁸

Towards the very end of the 1980s, Benin slowly developed into a multiparty democracy, and by 1990 Kérékou announced that he was a born-again Evangelical. In the first free election in 1991, he unexpectedly lost power. It was the first time that an opposition candidate in Francophone Africa won a free presidential election. The new president was Nicéphore Soglo (b. 1934), who had been one of the military coup leaders during the 1960s.

As a preparation for the presidential elections, in late 1990 Benin adopted a new Constitution, which decreed the principle of freedom of religious liberty and *laïcité*, thus underlining the non-confessional or secular status of the state. All creeds and religious activities are accepted as long as they do not cause social unrest. What the last paragraph means can, of course, become a matter of dispute. During the process of democratization and the presidency of Soglo (1990–1996), the Roman Catholic Church had a significant influence, while the president probably had a greater inclination towards Vodun.¹⁹

In the 1996 elections, the former leader Mathieu Kérékou returned as president for two consecutive periods. The spiritually re-born Kérékou appeared as a venerable sage and almost a kind of Messiah figure. During his long presidency (1996–2006), the number of Evangelical and Pentecostal

¹⁷ Henry 2008 and Falen 2016.

¹⁸ Tall 2015: 94.

¹⁹ For a detailed—and very positive—study of the Beninese principle of *laïcité* and freedom of religion, see Koovi 2018. Cf. Tall 2015: 94.

denominations in Benin grew exponentially, following the example of many other African countries. Though Kérékou had influential Evangelical political advisors, by and large, he upheld the principle of *laïcité*.²⁰

The Church of Banamè developed during the administration of Thomas Boni Yayi (b. 1952), who was the president of the republic between 2006 and 2016. Like his predecessor, he was a born-again Evangelical, who counted with pastors as political advisors. Still, with few exceptions, the principle of *laïcité* was upheld, and the Roman Catholic Church remained influential. Nevertheless, during this period the Catholic Church went through an institutional crisis when both Archbishop Agboton of Cotonou and Archbishop Agbatchi of Parakou were forced to resign, in 2010 for confessional and moral reasons.²¹

Contemporary Benin is more multi-religious than ever, though official statistics are quite unreliable. According to the last available census data from 2013, about a quarter of the 11 million Beninese are Muslims and another quarter Roman Catholics. At the same time, the other half of the population is divided into many different religious traditions, including several Evangelical and Pentecostal groups that have grown stronger throughout the 2010s. L'Église du Christianisme Celeste is another important religious actor. It is an indigenous church founded in 1947, and according to the census, it gathers around seven per cent of the Beninese population. Although claiming that they have a literal understanding of the Bible, visions and dreams have a central role. Through a complex system, the church performs spiritual warfare against *sorcellerie*, while many other churches accuse them of being a part of just that.²²

By the late 2010s, the Beninese Interior Ministry's register of officially recognized religious groups included somewhere between 150 and 200 groups and the share of the population that *only* practice Vodun seems to be continuously decreasing. However, double or multiple religious participation is widespread. Thus many Beninese also take part in Vodun rituals and or attend different Christian groups.²³

²⁰ Tall 2015: 94–98.

²¹ Tall 2015: 100–102.

²² Henry 2008, Mayrargue 2014, Tall 2015, and Koovi 2018

²³ Koovi 2018.

Thus, according to the Constitution of the Republic of Benin, the state should not interfere in religious matter. It is influenced by French law, but the Beninese interpretation of *laïcité* is different. It allows the president and other official representatives to take part in religious ceremonies, and the state contributes economically to religious groups. The fundamental element of Beninese *laïcité* is the legal equality of all religious groups. For example, both Muslim and Christian feasts are national holidays, and in 2006, January 10 became La Fête de Vodun celebrating indigenous traditions.²⁴ Such was the broader religio-political context when the Banamè phenomenon entered the religious scene.

Establishing the Church and the Papacy

The separate Church of Banamè was founded in August 2011. Originally it was known as L'Église Catholique Privée de Banamè(-Sovidji)–The Private Catholic Church of Banamè(-Sovidji). Later names include L'Église Catholique au Benin (The Catholic Church in Benin), L'Église Renovée (The Renewed Church), L'Église de Banamè–L'Église Catholique de Jésus Christ (The Church of Banamè–The Catholic Church of Jesus Christ), and eventually La Très Sainte Église de Jésus-Christ, Mission de Banamè (The Most Holy Church of Jesus Christ, the Mission of Banamè).

On October 21, 2011, a few months after the formal establishment of the Church of Banamè, the bishop of Abomey declared Mathias Vigan suspended *a divinis*, as he continuously and ‘seriously violat[e]d the norms of obedience and the doctrine and unity of the church.’ Bishop Houndékon stated that he suspended Vigan as he ‘constantly caus[e]d great harm to the Catholic Church and the salvation of the souls.’ The suspension implied that he was forbidden him to perform any priestly functions.

At the same time, the bishop put the parish church in Banamè under interdict: the Dagbovis were not allowed to use it. By then tens of thousands or even more than a hundred thousand people gathered in the small village on certain feast days, and there was a constant influx of pilgrims. In his decree,

²⁴ Koovi 2018.

Bishop Houndékon forbade all Catholics to take part in the ‘prayer sessions and cults’ that were organized there. The bishop did not mention the foundation of another church. Probably he did not think that the group merited that word.²⁵

As a direct answer to the episcopal decree, the Church of Banamè gathered thousands of adherents to a religious service at a sports arena. There Vigan declared that nobody, not even the whole Bishops Conference, could hinder him, as he was a priest of God.²⁶ The foundation of the church initiated the development of a more differentiated organizational structure. In May 2012, Daagbo chose a group of thirteen Apostles of the Holy Spirit–Apôtres de l’Esprit-Saint—which included Mathias Vigan.²⁷

Little more than a year after the formal establishment of the Church of Banamè, on November 17, 2012, Daagbo elected Mathias Vigan pope under the name Christophe XVIII. He was formally appointed and crowned during the enormous pilgrimage to Banamè that began on November 10. The days were filled with Masses, acts of piety, benedictions, deliverance, teachings by Daagbo and Nanyé Nicole, and messages from several saints, that Daagbo transmitted to the pilgrims. She explained the reason for her choice of the papal name. Christophe means the ‘bearer of Christ’, and Vigan was the one who will continue Christ’s mission in the current era. Eighteen was ‘her number’; she ‘was filled’ by Daagbo on November 18, 1992,’ and precisely two decades later, she elected Vigan as the pope, ‘the Vicar of Daagbo, God the Holy Spirit.’ During the ceremony, Daagbo said that Vigan was ‘Another Jesus’, that he was ‘Jesus’s Twin Brother’, and ‘Her Unique Son on Earth.’²⁸

Daagbo asserted that she, as God the Holy Spirit, of course, could elect a new pope, as the era of the Roman Catholic Church was over and that the Church of Banamè is the church Christ founded. To connect the claims to older

²⁵ *Quotidien Adjouakou*, December 4, 2011. Cf. “Déclaration de la Conférence Episcopale du Bénin sur la secte dénommée ‘église catholique privée de Banamè’”, 28 January 2013, published in *La Nouvelle Tribune*, February 2, 2013.

²⁶ *Quotidien Adjouakou*, December 4, 2011. Cf. “Déclaration de la Conférence Episcopale du Bénin sur la secte dénommée ‘église catholique privée de Banamè’”, 28 January 2013, published in *La Nouvelle Tribune*, February 2, 2013.

²⁷ “Interview accordé par Dieu Esprit Saint”, January 24, 2014 on Holy Spirit Benin: www.youtube.com/channel/UC9UfVmfD_Km-S59qmsUdNkg.

²⁸ “Église Catholique de Jésus-Christ, Cité de la Cour Céleste Banamè” and “Banamè du 11 au 18 novembre 2012”, on www.sovidji.org.

apocalyptic traditions, she also stated that several revelations, including those of Nostradamus, The *Prophecy of the Popes* by Saint Malachy, and most prominently the Italian mystic Anna Maria Taïgi, who in 1818 predicted the end of the Roman papacy. According to hagiographies, Taïgi foresaw a time when wars and other calamities killed a large portion of humanity, and when the pontiff would not live in Rome anymore. Then God would found a renewed church and the new true pontiff would be a simple priest from a faraway country.²⁹

Unlike many other groups who claim that the Roman Catholic popes and bishop have apostatized in recent years, Daagbo teaches that the threat was there from the very beginning of the church's existence. The Romans in Jesus's time were descendants of Ishmael, who managed to fool many of the early faithful Christians: the descendants of Isaac. According to her, Jesus was the first pope, a celestial pope, and his successor Saint Peter, who moved the Holy See to Rome was, indeed, a true pope, though terrestrial. He died in Rome of old age but was buried in Jerusalem at the side of the grave of Christ.

After Saint Peter's death, his son took over as the pope and the Vicar of Christ, and in the following centuries, the papal office went from father to son. Still, the vast majority of the Roman popes were imposters and apostates. Daagbo claims that some 90 per cent of them are in Hell and that there have been no true popes in Rome since the year 699, during the pontificate of Sergius I, when God the Holy Spirit, abandoned the Roman Catholic Church for good. With the election of Mathias Vigan in November 2012, the church has a pope 'who is celestial as well as terrestrial as he is the Vicar of God the Father.' In fact, Christophe XVIII was the first pope since Jesus who had this status, and the first true pope at all for more than 1300 years.³⁰

According to the teachings of the Church of Banamè, several Marian apparitions predicted Daagbo's arrival to earth including those at La Salette (1846), Lourdes (1858), Fatima (1917), Garabandal (1961–1965), Akita (1973–

²⁹ "Interview du Pape Christophe XVIII sur les débuts de la mission de Banamè" on La Prophetie est D'èvent Nous: www.ebenezaobe.e-monsite.com.

³⁰ "Catéchisme de Daagbo Dieu Esprit-Saint aur Rome" on ; La Prophetie est D'èvent Nous: www.ebenezaobe.e-monsite.com. Cf. "Église Catholique de Jésus-Christ, Cité de la Cour Céleste Banamè" on www.sovidji.org.

1979) and Medjugorje (1981–).³¹ They claim that from the end of the Roman Catholic Church in 699, apart from visiting the earth on numerous occasions, the Virgin Mary had prayed and wept blood for almost 1300 years, trying to convince God to descend to earth. In 1992, the Spirit came down with Parfaite as ‘His temple, taking the chair’ in Banamè. Although in human shape, the Dagbovis thus see Daagbo as Dieu Esprit-Saint, Createur du Ciel et de la Terre–God The Holy Spirit Creator of Heaven and Earth; Notre Grand Papa, Père de Jesus Seigneur et Saveur–Our Grand Father, Father of Jesus, Lord and Saviour; and Son Eternité Daagbo–His Eternity Daagbo.³²

For the Church of Banamè, the Secrets of Fatima were also presaging of the role of Daagbo. According to Daagbo’s teachings, the Virgin did not intend them as secrets, but the Roman Catholic Church choose to hide them, as the messages threatened its power. The First Secret announce the imminence of the End Time and the Divine Chastisement. The vision of Hell means that due to their sins and Satan’s power, 95 per cent of all humans end up there if they do not convert, pray and do penance. Interpreting the Second Secret of Fatima, Daagbo claims that ‘Russia’ should not be understood as a particular country. It mainly refers to the Roman Catholic Church, which is infested by freemasons and sorcerers. It also refers to all other religions like Vodun, Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, as they are all founded by the Devil. The Third Secret foresaw the arrival of the Virgin Mary and God, the Holy Spirit to earth. It also included a presage of the birth of a true church and the death of the false one.³³

According to the teachings of the Church of Banamè, Daagbo came down from Heaven to lead the faithful in the war against the apostate Roman Catholic Church and establish the True Church of the End Time. In this apocalyptic period and especially during the so-called Three Days of Darkness–another prophecy of Anna Maria Taïgi–Daagbo will be light for her followers, who through their faithfulness will reach salvation.³⁴

³¹ Message, January 4, 2018 on www.facebook.com/missionbaname.

³² “Catéchisme de Daagbo Dieu Esprit-Saint aur Rome” on La Prophetie est D’èvent Nous: www.ebenezaobe.e-monsite.com; and “Interview accordé par Dieu Esprit Saint”, January 24, 2014 on Holy Spirit Benin: www.youtube.com/channel/UC9UfVmfD_Km-S59qmsUdNkg.

³³ “La veritable expication des secrets de Fatima par la Vierge Marie a Banamè” on www.sovidji.org.

³⁴ “Catéchisme de Daagbo Dieu Esprit-Saint sur Rome” on La Prophetie est D’èvent Nous: www.ebenezaobe.e-monsite.com.

Following the papal election, on 25 January 2013, the Roman Catholic bishop of Abomey excommunicated Daagbo, Mathias Vigan and all adherents of the Church of Banamè *latae sententiae* for being heretics and apostates. A few days later, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Benin backed up the local bishop. Not mincing words, they stated that the Church of Banamè was a threat to the whole nation and that it was a satanic invention.

It no longer solely concerns the diocese of Abomey, but all the dioceses in our country and even beyond. Everywhere, our faithful, who are uninformed and thirsty for the sensational and see the mirage of the new, gather in large numbers at Banamè. In the dioceses, they organize rallies for the benefit of this so-called ‘église catholique privée de Banamè.’ Despite the warnings of the Ordinaries they adhere to the teachings of its founders, especially the said Parfaite. Satan likes to disguise himself under names that sow confusion. - - - The CEB urges all the faithful of Christ to look upon the ‘église catholique privée de Banamè’ as a schismatic prayer group. Therefore, the CEB prohibits all Catholics from attending their activities under pain of exposure to the same sanction [ex-communication *latae sententiae*].³⁵

Commenting on the papal election of Christophe XVIII, the Bishops Conference of Benin denounced the election of a pope in Banamè, an antipope in their eyes.

The CEB reaffirms the centuries-old doctrine concerning the Pope as the successor to Saint Peter, and the Bishops as the sole successors of the Apostles. To be a part of apostolic college, one must have been appointed by the Pope of Rome and have received episcopal ordination by a Bishop, assisted by two other bishops, all in communion with the Apostolic See. No one can proclaim himself Pope or be proclaimed Pope by a third person.³⁶

Not surprisingly, the leaders of the Church of Banamè were highly critical against the bishops’ decisions. On the other hand, they had expected this

³⁵ “Déclaration de la Conférence Episcopale du-Benin sur la secte dénommée ‘église catholique privée de Banamè’”, 28 January 2013, published in *La Nouvelle Tribune*, February 2, 2013.

³⁶ “Déclaration de la Conférence Episcopale du Benin sur la secte dénommée ‘église catholique privée de Banamè’”, 28 January 2013, published in *La Nouvelle Tribune*, February 2, 2013.

development. As before, they argued that the Holy Spirit had left the Roman Catholic Church and that they had no power to excommunicate a pope directly installed by God or the faithful of the True Church, led by Daagbo. To them, Divine Revelation did not end with the death of John the Apostle, whom they consider the author of the Book of Revelation. Heaven continues to speak to humanity, not least through apparitions, and with Daagbo, God has taken the chair as has the Virgin Mary, and now Jesus, too, in the person of Pope Christophe.

Through their statement, the bishops had sinned against the Holy Ghost, an unforgivable sin. They and other Roman Catholic clerics had had three years to discover the truth, but they had not even bothered listening to the message. To the Church of Banamè, the Roman Catholic clergy are nothing but Luciferian agents, sorcerers, mafiosos and freemasons, eager for power and money, and in conspiracy with Vodun. They believed that the old centre of the church, Rome, would soon turn into a vast museum as it has no religious significance. The new and definitive Vatican was being constructed in Banamè, the site of the Holy See.³⁷

With time the Church of Banamè's stories about Pope Christophe's background developed and became more supernatural. Some of it has to do with his birth. In the sixth month of her pregnancy, somebody tried to poison his mother. The fetus died but was resurrected and started to grow. This mother did not give birth to him until 15 months after the conception. While being born and conceived as a human being, God had created the pope's soul in the year 699, just as the Holy Spirit left the Roman Catholic Church. Daagbo also teaches that he is the Twin Brother of Jesus—Frère Jumeau de Jésus Christ—who currently is Jesus on earth as the 'Unique Son of Daagbo.'³⁸

After the election of Pope Christophe XVIII, in November 2012, the other Apostles of the Holy Spirit, ten males and two females, were made cardinals. They were like bishops, leading dioceses, but they were not consecrated. Most of them were well educated, and the women were both former Roman Catholic

³⁷ Apostle Jean-Clavaire Houndagnon, "Les évêques du Bénin ont franchi le rubicon", March 11, 2013; and "Église Catholique de Jésus-Christ, Cité de la Cour Céleste Banamè" on www.sovidji.org.

³⁸ E.g. Messages February 24, 2017 and November 17, 2018 on www.facebook.com/baname.

sisters.³⁹ At Pentecost 2013, Pope Christophe ordained the first eighteen priests in the Church of Banamè; they were all male. According to the church between 100,000 and 200,000 pilgrims were present on this occasion. At about the same time, Daagbo founded three congregations for women: La Congrégation de Saint Etienne, La Congrégation de la Charité, and La Congrégation de Saint Christophe. Both priests and nuns are celibate. At Christmas 2013, Pope Christophe consecrated the church's first seven bishops and ordained more than fifty new priests. In the coming years, more priests and bishops were ordained. Apart from that, some of the bishops were elevated to the cardinalate.⁴⁰

Most of the bishops have geographically demarcated dioceses, and the cardinals have different areas of responsibility within the curia. In 2017, there were seven dioceses in the Church of Banamé (all in Benin), 180 parishes, 12 cardinals, 12 bishops, and about 170 priests.⁴¹ At the religious services, the priests and bishops most often wear white albs and red chasubles, and the bishops have red mitres and skull caps. The pope is usually dressed in white but uses red vestments, too. Red is Daagbo's colour. When appearing in public, she always uses a white alb-like vestment and a red hat, and Nanyé Nicole is also dressed in white but wears a light blue head-scarf.

Although the village of Banamè is the church's unquestionable spiritual centre, there are adherents in other parts of Benin, mainly the southern and central regions, not in the Muslim dominated northern provinces. Nevertheless, there are Daagbovis in other countries, too. In 2017, the church counted with adherents and missionary presence in Gabon, Cameroun, Togo, Côte D'Ivoire, Nigeria, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Mali and Chad, but also among Beninese migrants in France, Germany, the United States and Canada.⁴²

There are constant pilgrimages to the Sainte Colline de Banamè, which today is known as Sainte Colline d'Ezéchiel. Though it is hard to know how accurate the official estimates are, the church claims that hundreds of thousands

³⁹ "Programme Pentecôte Speciale 16 au 19 mai, 2013" on www.sovidji.org. On the background of the first cardinals, see Tall 2015: 105.

⁴⁰ "Interview accordé par Dieu Esprit Saint", January 24, 2014 on Holy Spirit Benin: www.youtube.com/channel/UC9UfVmfD_Km-S59qmsUdNkg

⁴¹ "La Très Sainte Église de Jésus Christ, Conférence Episcopal de Benin" on www.sovidji.org.

⁴² Message, November 21, 2017 on www.facebook.com/missionbaname. Cf. www.baname.top.

or even a million of people are present on some feast days, though the latter seems highly implausible.

The church has five obligatory feasts when Daagbovis from Benin and neighbouring countries should make pilgrimages to Banamè. Easter is not a mobile feast, as Daagbo teaches that Christ was crucified on April 15, on his 33rd birthday. Likewise, Pentecost is always celebrated at the beginning of June, fifty days after Easter. At Pentecost, the church does not only celebrate the outpouring of the Spirit after the death and resurrection of Christ but that Daagbo, God the Holy Spirit is on earth.⁴³

The most important holiday for the Daagbovis is the Fête de Novembre—the November Feast. It begins on the 11th and ends on the 21st. Four of the days have particular importance. The 11th is Nayhé Nicole’s birthday. The 13th is the celebration of Parfaite’s arrival to earth, and the 17th is the anniversary of the real papacy. Still, the peak of the November pilgrimage is on November 18, when the church celebrates La Fête d’Entrée de Dieu Esprit Saint dans la Chair, that is, when Daagbo arrived in Banamè in 1992.⁴⁴

The fifth of the obligatory feasts, the Feast of the Birth of Christ, Christmas is not celebrated in Banamè, but in Wokou—the New Nazareth—a village located in the province of Zou, which was the hometown of Mathias Vigan—Pope Christophe XVIII. Still, the church does not believe that Christ was born at that time of the year, but on April 15, the same date as he was crucified.⁴⁵

Though there are differences between the different festivities, some elements are recurrent: Masses, prayers of the Rosary, sermons by the pope and teachings by Daagbo and Nanyé Nicole. Benedictions, deliverances, cures and fires also have a place, as has the so-called *passages de saints*, which take place just after the end of the Mass. It means that different saints, such as Stephan, Joan of Arc and Padre Pio, pass by providing messages to the faithful, through Daagbo. When Daagbo teaches, she most often appears as God, but sometimes she speaks in another, much lighter voice. On these occasions, she presents

⁴³ “Peligrinages annuels” on www.sovidji.org.

⁴⁴ “Peligrinages annuels” on www.sovidji.org.

⁴⁵ “Peligrinages annuels” on www.sovidji.org.

herself as Sainte Parfaite, the young woman who is the receptacle of God, the Holy Spirit.

Though not an obligatory pilgrimage, La Fête de la Renaissance de L'Humanité—The Feast of the Renaissance of Humanity—on January 9–10 is another significant event during the liturgical year. It is also called the Fête du Feu—the Fire Feast—and was instituted in 2014. It is a holiday that emphasizes Daagbo's mission: to cleanse the world from *sorcellerie*. It is also an apparent attempt to counteract the national Vodun Holiday that takes place on that very day. On this occasion, the burning fire, Le Feu de Calciner—Zo in the Fon language—has a central position. Interestingly enough, in this way, the church uses a Vodun concept and turn it around, using it as a weapon against Vodun.⁴⁶

Moreover, throughout the year, the Church of Banamè has meetings in several other Benines towns and cities, generally at public places such as sports arenas. There, Masses, deliverance services and teaching sessions take place. These reunions constitute both meeting places for adherents and places of evangelization.⁴⁷

Banamè, *Laïcité* and Conflicts

According to international reports, there have been very few infractions of religious liberty in Benin during the 2010s. Still, the Church of Banamè has been both a hotly debated theme and an apple of discord.⁴⁸ At least from 2013 onwards, there have been clashes between Dagbovis and other sectors of the Beninese society, and large groups of police officers have been present at church events. The question has been if the Church of Banamè constitutes a cause for social unrest, that is, whether the government could interfere against it with police or military force, without breaking against the Constitution.

Like other groups, the Church of Banamè applied to be included among the officially recognized entities on the list of the Ministry of Interior Affairs. Still, in their case, the process toward registration was unusually slow. In a press

⁴⁶ “Peligrinages annuels” on www.sovidji.org.

⁴⁷ See videos on BanamèTV: www.youtube.com/channel/UCOYQAEIi5ctnT0Z5pkO_CKg

⁴⁸ U.S. Department of State, Reports on International Religious Freedom –Benin, 2013–2018.

release that the church sent out on August 19, 2014, they stated that they had applied six months ago but that they still had not received the official status. In light of this, they denounced the government and regarded the drawn-out process as an unconstitutional infraction of their legal rights. In the document, they blamed both the president and the Roman Catholic Church.⁴⁹

As a part toward official recognition, in 2014 the government urged the Church of Banamè not to use names usually connected with the Roman Catholic Church, such as ‘pope’ and ‘cardinal’, as it could be an infringement of the rights of the Roman Catholic Church.⁵⁰ Following this decision, Daagbo denounced President Boni Yayi for breaking the constitution, and the principles of *laïcité* and freedom of religion, not equaling the rights of the Church of Banamè and those of the Roman Catholic Church. She saw the president’s opposition as a sign of his disregard for the law. She also openly criticized his attempts to change the constitution so that he would be able to serve a third presidential period.

On his hand, Boni Yayi publicly criticized the Church of Banamè for threatening the social order and sent representatives from the Ministry of Interior to Banamè. The president intended to enable a dialogue with the church leaders, who did not appreciate what they saw as an unconstitutional attempt to control their internal affairs. Boni Yayi also had an official meeting with Daagbo in 2014. These measures did not solve any problems, and the meeting with the president made things even worse, as Daagbo claimed that the president had been disrespectful, not treating her in a way that her divine position entailed.⁵¹

At least from 2014 onwards, the press reported about confrontations between Daagbovis and adherents of other religious groups, in particular with Roman Catholics and practitioners of Vodun. Sometimes, these confrontations were violent. In early 2017 a group of Vodun adherents took to violence, as they were ‘insulted and offended’ by the Daagbovis’s anti-Vodun messages and after hearing rumours that they planned to destroy a temple of theirs. As a result, several people were killed and numerous injured, and after the first violent

⁴⁹ “Communiqué de presse de la Très Sainte Église de Jésus-Christ de Banamè”, August 19, 2014 on www.sovidji.org.

⁵⁰ *Les 4 Vérités*, February 6, 2014.

⁵¹ *L’Obs*, March 1, 2017.

confrontation, a group of Daagbovis returned heavily armed. Still, the conflict did not escalate any further.⁵²

Not least given her opposition towards Boni Yoni, Daagbo very openly supported Patrice Talon's (b. 1958) presidential candidacy in the 2016 elections, and Talon quite unexpectedly won against Boni Yoyi's favourite candidate. In the years following the election, on many occasions, Daagbo has spoken about Talon as her 'true son', thus implicating that he is a Daagbovi, not a Roman Catholic, something that Talon forcefully denies. Still, some commentators thought that Daagbo's open and robust support of Talon explains why the president has not intervened against the Church of Banamè, while Talon refers to the principle of *laïcité* and the freedom of religion.⁵³

In 2017, there was a much-publicized case involving the Church of Banamè. According to testimonies, some church leaders, including cardinals, had urged a group of Daagbovis to enter a sealed house. They provided them with charcoal and incense to burn to cleanse their souls. As a result, four or five people died from asphyxiation by inhaling carbon monoxide, and ten others were severely injured.⁵⁴ Though Daagbo was accused of being the brain behind, the police arrested four clerics for accessory to manslaughter, but they were later released on bail, and no court proceedings have taken place so far. The clerics deny any responsibility for the event.⁵⁵

During, there have been severe accusations against the leaders of the Church of Banamè, not least Daagbo, for using religion as a way to enrich themselves. They have been accused of charging entry fees to take part in meetings and for ceremonies, and for selling holy salt and sacred oils used as weapons against demons.⁵⁶ Daagbo has indeed gathered much money, and by mid-2019 CRIET, a special court established to combat economic crimes and terrorism froze her bank accounts, and it seems likely that they will press formal charges against her and the church.

Daagbo has stated that all accusations are part of a denigration campaign orchestrated by the Roman Catholic Church, but also that God, that is, herself

⁵² *L'Obs*, March 1, 2017.

⁵³ *Jeune Afrique*, June 21, 2018.

⁵⁴ *La Croix Africa*, February 20, 2017.

⁵⁵ U.S. Department of State, "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Benin".

⁵⁶ *L'Express*, April 14, 2013.

does not fall under human laws. Still, due to the controversies, the Church of Banamè does not seem to attract as many adherents as they did a few years back, and the number of clerics has also diminished. Currently, for example, the number of cardinals has decreased to half; there are just six left. Daagbo has taken a defensive position with several public messages in 2019 and early 2020. The future of the Church of Banamè is uncertain, though Daagbo states that no human power can defeat its divine mission.⁵⁷

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