

# The Development of Physical Activities in the French West Africa Territories

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**Abstract:** This socio-historical approach of physical activity and sport focuses on Mali, Southern Burkina Faso and Northern Ivory Coast. We interest both to the representations of body and sport phenomenon. Numerous cultural and historical factors throw light on the situation of physical education in Sahel (religion, ethnicity, settlement). The beginning of sport in western Africa is placed under the control of France. The indigenous were forbidden to do sport, but later with the World War I, French authorities have seen in teaching of physical education a great way to strengthen the Army. Then, the physical activities appear as useful and subversive practices. The African national sports emerge during 1950 decade, mainly in track and field and football.

**Keywords:** Physical education, Africa, Sport, France, Army.

## INTRODUCTION

This research deals with sport and physical activities in French West Africa. This article constitutes a small part of a three years survey. The previous researches put in evidence the social factors of running in Mali and Ivory Coast. The present research permits to understand the link between settlers and indigenous through sport and physical activity. It bases on a field survey *in situ*. We watched the techniques of traditional hunters of Mande, the body exploited, the body exalted, the body hided and several rituals of integration. The socio-historic approach reveals the strong relationships between school, army and sport. We interest to different societies of Mali, Ivory Coast (North and city of Abidjan) and Burkina Faso (East). We led research near people living in the cultural area Mande-Gur, into the area Bamako/ Bobo-Dioulasso/ Korhogo. The population is constituted of more than seventy ethnic groups like Malinke, Bamana, Bobo, Fulbe, Ouassoulonke, Marka and Senufo.

## THE LANGUAGE OF BODY

In 1934 the anthropologist Marcel Mauss [1] uses the expression “techniques du corps” to mean the way by which, society of society, mankind is using the body. This study focuses on the body touching both traditional practices and sport.

It appears necessary to consider the impact of Islam and traditional rules on the practise of physical education. We notice a lot of codes of honour, like the

*Pulaako* of Fulbe, the *Haawi* of Songhay, the *Dambe* of Soninke-Marka and the *Tangalt* of Touareg. These codes inspect the gesture of each member, especially the women. It touches the way to have lunch with the right hand to the way of walking. Many Malian citizens avoid using some parts of their body, Moussa, 23 years old, claims that he uses the left hand only in the toilets. The gesture, *hexis* or *habitus* are learnt during the childhood, the period to explore all the side of his body. But the end of childhood means the end of traditional games and sport. The body of Fulbe must be an example of wisdom, it has to be stiff.

The network of kinship and friendship inspects all the side body. Contrary to people from the popular boroughs, the standing of living of the richest people of Bamako or Bobo-Dioulasso permits to explore furthers opportunities. They live in the nuclear families of the upper class and they have an access to many sports. In these high-class families the physical efforts are substituted by cars, motorcycles, housewives; and the boys play football or basketball in the greatest club of the town. However, the employees coming from the small villages of Mali or Burkina Faso are working with the techniques they have learnt during their childhood. The peasant and lower-class member know the way to put the products on the head, the way to spit out, to run, to clean clothes, and to take care about children. It may to say that the bodily tradition belongs to peasant societies and that the sport belongs to urban culture? How city-dweller and farmer are feeling and using their body?

## THE FIRST CLUBS

At the end of XIXe century, France is at the front of a colonial empire, the French Western Africa (1895).

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The AOF is a wide area including Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Mauritania, Niger, Dahomey and Guinea [2].

In 1905, some settlers and soldiers found the first club of sport in Conakry, the main city of Guinea. The most of sportsmen of the "Union Artistique, Sportive et de Tir" of Conakry are European because the natives are not allowed to do sport. The French authorities fear that defeating the European settlers, African might be conscious of their strength. There is no small victory and it may that African people translate it in political claiming. The segregation of bodies appears as a way to preserve the colonial power and to avoid the empowerment of indigenous people. In this French Africa traditional practices and cultural movements are considered as a threat. But the situation of sport is different into the British colonial empire in which the indirect rules promote to spread European games in the native societies. In 1848, many Indians play cricket in the English sportsmen way. The Mouloudia Club of Algiers was founded in 1921. It represents the first mixed club of France. After 1921 few clubs of sport are allowed to African, they open in Senegal, French Sudan and Ivory Coast.

- Dakar: Société sportive la Jeanne d'Arc
- Dakar: La tricolore
- Bamako: Société Jeanne d'Arc
- Dakar: Union Sportive Indigène (U.S.I)
- Sikasso: Société Sportive de Sikasso

In A.O.F the most of clubs are managed by bishops or missionaries. They have promoted sport in Mali, Guinea or Haute-Volta (Burkina). The stadiums built prior the independence were built thanks to the action of catholic missionaries.

- Bishop Monseigneur de Montclos: Sikasso (Mali)
- Father Lecoq: Saint Louis (Senegal)
- Father Bouvier: Bamako (Mali)
- Father Macaire: Port Gentil (Gabon)
- Father Roy: Conakry (Guinea)

## **PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND ARMY**

Whereas the first modern Olympics of Pierre de Coubertin take place in Athens, France achieves what

was presented as a way of civilization: in 1895 the French Western Africa is made up. Inspired by indigenous bodies and way of life, the officer Georges Hebert founds the "Natural Method" and the "Parcours du combattant" for soldiers training. In 1870, after the defeat against Prussians, French government of "III Republique" reinforces the lesson of physical education into the school system. At the end of the World War I, the authorities promote physical education for African pupils in order to strengthen the national army. The African people have the moral duty to defend their country of adoption. In 1919, France inherits from Germany and U.N of two other colonies in West Africa: Togo and Cameroon. In order to prevent the German aggression, French government decides to incorporate indigenous in the national army [3].

The authorities introduce physical education in indigenous schools, but the most of African are not provide with schooling. In the same time they open the Centre of Physical Education for African Soldiers located in the city of Thiaroye, in Senegal. The objectives of this military preparation and the physical education methods are unsuccessful. The Sudanese of A.O.F do not understand why they have to run or to do exercises. Nowadays the exercises still hit the sensibility of some people who feel ashamed to run with knickers like children. The oldest Fulbe assert that people doing physical exercises look alike monkeys or that means a lack of education.

- 1914: The first exceptional recruitment in A.O.F, 9800 Men recruited.
- 1915: Two recruitments 10 800 Men and 4619 Men, these recruitments lead to the revolts of Beledugu, revolts in Haute-Volta and in Dahomey (1916).
- 1921: A law voted pronounced that Physical education is obligatory in the schools.
- 1922: 20 September, a law pronounced obligatory the practice of physical education in the colonies.
- 1923: Physical Education is obligatory in indigenous schools.
- 1923-1929: Laid down in 1925, the African Games take place in 1929.
- 1929: The first association totally indigenous: U.S.I of Dakar

## THE BEGINNING OF AFRICAN SPORT

The arrival of black in modern sport begins with the sad match between Tom Molineaux and Tom Cribbs, in 1810. The African American prize-fighter stolen by referees succumbs few years later, lonely and alcoholic in Galway, Ireland. As all dominated people, African and African American are excluded to the practice of many sports and leisure. Black people live between slavery, segregation or colonisation [4]. The first champion from French Africa was the Senegalese Battling Siki. In 1922, Siki wins the title of world champion in boxing, beating the French star Georges Carpentier. Scandalized French federation decides one month later to take his licence away from him. This victory means the end of his career.

In 1928 Olympics, the Algerian Boughera El Ouafi wins the gold medals in the Marathon. Some voices claims to use Berberes from North Africa to win further medals. Later, the exploits of black athletes from U.S.A decide French to integrate African in the national sport. In 1936, Jesse Owens wins four medals. The journalists, coaches and officials talk about black superiority in Track and field. They consider that Africa could be a fish pond. The sport represents an international window and it becomes necessary to win medals [5].

In 1941, the French government of Vichy organizes the "Imperial week". This event represents a universal exposition of sport which purpose is to provide the image of France in the world. The message is clear: France is fragile in front of Germany but the "French State" owns a wide empire overseas.

The relationship between African, French and sport are ambiguous, it rocks between fears and hopes of victory. During 1950s decade the sportsmen become the great defenders of independences. The 1950s represent the beginning of the African national sport. The sport has grown featuring the process of decolonization. The great athletes are students and the most of them lived in Paris. They are students, athletes and militant members into the African student movement "Association des Etudiants d'Afrique Noire". Among them we find the first champions in track and field as Papa Gallo Thiam, the French champion in high jump; Mbaye (triple jump); Abdou Seye (Olympic medallist in 200 M) or Lamine Diack the future president of I.A.A.F.

## THE POSTCOLONIAL SPORT

When Western French Africa countries reach to independence and take their destiny in hand, we assist to a phenomenon that some historian are called the *Decolonization of stadiums* [6]. In 1960, African governments decided to change the name of stadiums in African name. In Mali, the Stadium Bouvier located in the city of Bamako changed in Stadium Mamadou Konaté, the name of one of the founders of modern Mali and leader of R.D.A party. Since 1990, the new stadiums display symbolic names:

- Stadium of 26 Mars, in Bamako: A popular revolt took place on March 1991. Malian people defy the president General Moussa Traore:
- Stadium of 4 Août, in Ouagadougou: The 4 August 1960 the country reaches to independence under the name of Haute Volta, then Burkina Faso (1984).
- Stadium Houphouet-Boigny: Felix Houphouet-Boigny was the first president of Ivory Coast (1960-1993).
- Stadium Babemba, Sikasso: Tieba and Babemba Traore were the kings of Kenedugu. The French troops take hold of kingdom in 1898.

During the colonial period African from Mali, Guinea or Senegal rejected what they considerate as French practices, mainly track and field and all individual practices reminding the military physical education.

In 1966, six years after they reached to their sovereignty and after the affiliation to the International Olympic Committee, the new States reunited in Bamako found the "Conseil Supérieur du Sport en Afrique" a Pan African council of sport [7].

The euphoria of new states fall down: putsch, bribery or the ambiguous connections with France contribute to weaken the institutions. Hostages of the bipolar system of cold war, the states of Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso give priority to the army; then sport and education are relegated.

Since colonial period the football is more appreciated than athletics or other an individual activity, this sport is accommodate to the particularity of the culture community, in which each member of the group must participate. In West Africa football is the main sport; it focuses all the hopes of the youth [8]. For the

**Table 1: Ethnography: Mande-Gur Cultural Area**

| Research       | Area   | Field Survey   | Seminars and Conferences   | Archives and Links   |
|----------------|--|--|--|--|
| <u>3 years</u> | - Mali:<br>Bamako, Bougouni,<br>Sikasso, Kadiolo, Zegoua.<br>- Burkina Faso: Orodara,<br>Bobo-Dioulasso.<br>- Ivory Coast: Korhogo,<br>Ferkéssédougou, Bouaké,<br>Abidjan. | - Travel in Mali, Ivory Coast<br>- Housing available and free,<br>networks established during<br>previous surveys in the area. | -Ethnology of west Africa.<br>- Techniques of Bodies<br>- History and Sociology of<br>sports.<br>- Race and Sport<br>- The Myth of Black Athlete | Department of History<br>Department of Political<br>science<br>Department of Geography<br>Department of Anthropology<br>Department of<br>Sociology |

lower-class members football represents the better way to sort out of poverty. Confronted to poverty and without any perspectives, young boys bet on the football profitability. According to many West African some societies have made to play football and further to do athletics as Kenyan and Ethiopian. If the Malian and Ivoirian have chosen football we notice that many migrants and West African descendants living in France are successful in Track and field disciplines.

## CONCLUSION

In order to stop all way of resistance, many games and practises were prohibited. According to the French administration all practises could be suspicious or subversive. For the colonial period Malian reject athletics, track reminding them the French military and physical education. Each week in the stadiums of Dakar in Senegal the crowd assists to a traditional game which has become the most popular sport, the Senegalese wrestling. What city dwellers call "Lutte senegalaise" has become the national sport. Senegalese wrestling finds his origin in the Sereer society. According to the Sereer mythology wrestling comes from the meeting of a magical dwarf and a

young shepherd. The African people give up traditional practises as archery, games, initiation. Marcel Griaule [9] has related numerous games coming from Dogon society. After a decade of political crisis in Mali, Ivory Coast or Guinea we notice the growth of artistic and sport phenomenon. Face up to the difficulties the musical and artistic movements are successful near the youth living in the borough of Abidjan, Bamako or Ouagadougou. In these African cities football and dance are strongly linked.

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