

Science Put to the Test of Mysticism in the “Navetanes”

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Abstract

Mystical practices or “Xon” exist in virtually every sector of social life in Senegal. Popular or “navétane” football is particularly and profoundly affected by this phenomenon, to the point of raising questions about their place in this sport, which is naturally governed by scientific rules of performance. To provide an answer, we used qualitative methods, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 9 coaches and those in charge of the “xonjom”. The main results highlight the predominance of “Xon” over training. The players pay more attention to the mystics. The creation of a commission responsible for occult practices and the efforts made by the players to approach occultists and ensure that their instructions are respected attest to the importance of “xonjom”. As a result of the social anchoring provided by education, popular football is not spared from “xon”. More time is spent practising mysticism than training. They are seen as a source of victory, playing the role of psychological preparation. The centralisation of “xonjom” is reflected in the prioritisation of “xon” over training. The marabouts’ instructions take precedence over those of the trainers.

Keywords

Mystical Practices, Science, Popular Football, Belief

1. Introduction

Sport has become a “social phenomenon” M. Mauss [1] and “sporting performance, a royal road to the affirmation of the personality of peoples and of a society” J. P. Callède [2]. Indeed, it spares no sector of life and generates a great deal of enthusiasm, passion and consideration. As a result, in many countries, the structuring of sport to facilitate its management has favoured several types of organisation. In Senegal, “the dominant sports model is that of sports organised

by federations delegated by the State, which nevertheless has many limitations in terms of all the different forms of demand for sport” A. D. Mbaye [3], which are diverse, while the formal, structured and “institutionalised” offer, in the sense of P. Parlebas [4], is reduced and even exclusive of many forms of practice that are different from the official system. The latter is the responsibility of the federations and is characterised by sports meetings during specific periods such as weekends, public holidays (corporatist championships), the rainy season with the “navétanes¹”, etc., and during the rainy season with the “navétanes”. Those held during the rainy season, still known as the Championnat National Populaire (CNP), focus mainly on football and socio-cultural activities. It is, in fact, a neighbourhood sport characterised by its close proximity to the people who form and carry the Sports and Cultural Associations (ASCs) in their hearts, while clearly imbuing them with their socio-cultural characteristics. In other words, CSAs are showcases for “the distinctive spiritual, material, emotional and intellectual features” UNESCO [5] of the specific areas in which they are set up. As if to reinforce this idea of eminently cultural transfer in the field of sport, F. D. Loum [6] noted this phenomenon while highlighting the reasons for it in the following terms, “Senegalese man integrates and expresses the religious, moral and traditional norms and values of society, norms and values that are appropriated during the socialisation process, as is the case everywhere else.” More directly, “mysticism in Senegal is a reality that is experienced on a daily basis and is increasingly in the headlines today” H. Dieng [7]. This is why its transfer to the popular, grassroots sport of “Navétane” is almost a social demand to which those directly involved (players and managers), as part of the milieu, almost automatically subscribe.

Similarly, the galvanising proximity and fear of losing matches against one’s immediate neighbour or the neighbouring district encourage great rivalries and derbies between sports and cultural associations (ASC). This situation leads to the use of any means necessary to achieve victory. In particular, people tend to add a strong dose of mystical practices to the formal scientific training and technical-tactical preparation on football pitches. Moreover, in the opinion of D. Chevé [8] “this amateur football, which is ‘navétane’, is today considered to be the preferred place for occult practices (...)”. Better still, in these more than 8000 ASCs in town and country, because of occult practices, performance factors such as technique, tactics, physical and mental fitness are relegated to second place. This finding by Al. O. Ka [9]: “Today, we see that the coach who embodied leadership and whose mission was to produce good football and implement effective strategies to enable his team to win its matches, is relegated to the background because of occult practices called “Xons²” which have become both myth and reality, often transforming the playing field into a national arena”. As a result, the search for people who are mystified and capable of performing occult practices is becoming a priority for those in power. As a result, the marabout is

¹“Navétane”, a popular football championship for ASCs (Sports and Cultural Associations).

²“xon”: mystical practice.

perceived as “a magician, a seer, a divine” I. Sow [10].

These occult practices, which are socially and athletically validated and integrated, affect virtually all CSAs. In Casamance (southern Senegal), specifically in zone 2B of the Organisme Départemental de Coordination des Activités de Vacances (ODCAV) in Ziguinchor, this concept of “navétane” competitions combining mysticism and the logic of training is so deeply rooted and demanded by the players and populations of zone 2 that it has become part of the popular consciousness. For this reason, this phenomenon is an interesting subject of study, which led us to the following research question: do occult practices, which are characteristic of Senegalese society and are strongly present and even demanded by those involved in navétane football in Ziguinchor in particular, tend to take precedence over training and the technical-tactical aspects that are scientifically accepted as the only factors in performance in the popular national championship in Zone 2 of Ziguinchor in particular? In other words, this study aims to establish the place of the occult irrational in football governed by a scientifically proven performance logic. To do this, we need to define a clear methodology.

2. Methodology

The study was carried out in Ziguinchor, a town in the south-western part of Senegal, bordering Gambia to the north and Guinea-Bissau to the south. Our field of study is more restricted, covering only the neighbourhoods of Niéfoulène, Guiringho, Soucoupapaye, Colobane and Péryssac, where the CSAs affiliated to the city’s zone 2B are based and play. These include teams such as Ajax, Aline Sitoé Diatta, Réal, Djiringhor, Entente, Fass, ASCAPS, Renaissance and Djignabo, all of whom are known for their devotion to occult practices. To answer our research question, we used mainly qualitative methods, with semi-directive interviews with the 9 permanent coaches and those in charge of the “xonjom”, who are often asked to play the role of “xonjomeur³”. Our discussions were supplemented by participant observation: we were born there, grew up there and spent twenty-five (25) days of the school holidays in 2023. This trip enabled us to shed light on a number of practices observed during the participant observation and about which the perpetrators did not want to say anything. The field data collected using these techniques and those obtained through documentary research made it possible to gauge the role of mystical practices in the technical, tactical, physical and mental aspects of fieldwork.

3. Results

One of the distinctive features of the “navétane” movement is its ecosystem. All the ASCs are structured with an office made up of different committees. Several people are involved in looking after the teams and helping them to succeed. Because, “subject to obligations and pressures, the player must evolve in a climate

³Person in charge of “xon”.

of trust that facilitates his accomplishment” E. Mombaerts, [11]. The elements of the complex network of relationships in which he must find his balance and progress must be perfect to enable him to accomplish his task. This is why this ecosystem most often manifests itself in activities to promote good results, with a particular focus on mystical practices.

3.1. From the Need to Create Commission X to the Importance Attached to It

Navétane has a number of specific features, such as the creation of an “X” committee responsible for “Xonjom”, also known in some CSAs as the “black committee” or social committee. It is responsible for managing the mystical component. Its role is all the more important as it exists in all CSAs, even though the ONCAV’s statutes and regulations prohibit occult practices and only emphasise the sporting performance inherent in training. The members of the mystical committees and the coaches are virtually unanimous: *“It’s compulsory. All the teams do it, so why shouldn’t we? What’s more, it’s our reality (...). Everyone’s demanding it”*. This situation reveals the psychosocial anchoring of occultism in the “navétane” movement, which is supported by the club. In reality, it is the strong tendencies embodied, externalized and federated by the players individually that are transformed into a demand carried by the club. And it’s clear that this reality is virtually the same in all the ASCs in zone 2B of Ziguinchor: Ajax, Aline Sitoé Diatta, Réal, Djiringhor, Entente, Fass, ASCAPS, Renaissance and Djignabo. That’s why it’s easy to agree on the creation of a commission for this purpose. As a result, considerable resources, which vary from team to team, are made available to enable the committee to do its job. It even happens that the results on the pitch after each match and/or each tournament are explained in relation to the effectiveness of these “mystical commissions”, which, according to the players, are the only ones authorised to manage these mystical activities.

However, alongside these occult activities carried out by the CSA in favour of victory, the players also take their mystical steps in private. In fact, to achieve more selfish objectives such as winning their position, pleasing the coach, protecting themselves from mystical attacks, scoring goals, being the star of the team, etc., footballers benefit from the support of their families. The sensitivity of mysticism brings the question of trust to the fore. That’s why it’s usually the direct parents who take care of it. In the opinion of the coaches, *“very few players limit themselves to the mystical activities of their teams. They also have their xonjoms around. We’ve had players who want to stick to the baths and gris-gris of their families, and we’ve refused. We rely on the practices, recommendations and mystical requirements of the CSA Xon Commission (...).”*

Moreover, the sacrifices required to carry out the mission of the members of Committee X are enormous. Chosen by the most loyal leaders, they work on a voluntary basis. In short, they are responsible for approaching occultists and supervising all the rituals, from the preparations at the venue to the fieldwork. These members are not magico-religious specialists themselves, but act as inter-

mediaries between the team and the marabouts. In this respect, the respondents were almost unanimous: *“The ‘X’ commission goes to see the marabouts and brings the baths to wash themselves... They (the xomjomeurs) come early to the group to take the baths. They follow the instructions given by the marabout(s) to the letter (...). Often the marabout himself travels to the gathering place to administer his ‘Xons’ (...).”* In addition, the specific places for certain practices are cemeteries and/or the stadium, secretly and at night. The obstinacy of the managers in setting up this “Commission X” and the fact that the services are provided free of charge help to explain the importance attached to the “Commission X” by the managers of each of the teams in zone 2B of Ziguinchor. As a result, it has become an element in the management and explanation of sporting performance, even though the general regulations of the “navétanes” and the principles of STAPS formally exclude it.

In short, the “X” Commission exists in each of the ASCs in Zone 2B of Ziguinchor. Its creation is demanded by virtually everyone involved. The importance attached to it explains why it is so important to the management of the team’s sporting performance, and the sacrifices made by its members in approaching occultists and enforcing their mystical instructions alongside the scientific rules of training.

3.2. More Time Devoted to Mystical Practices than to Training

The players in the “navétane” movement seem to be victims of their socialisation, as their behaviour and their relationship with mystical practices are directly in line with the dispositions they have acquired through education. And this has a direct impact on the way they view football. As a result, mystical practices are much in demand in the popular national championship or “navétanes”. The respondents all agreed, and expressed it in different ways: *“...The ‘xon’ remain at the heart of the ‘navétane’ movement. They are part of the décor and even the charm (...). No ASC dares join without making the ‘samp’⁴ of its team. There is even talk of a marabout mercato at the start of the preparations before the competitions get underway (...).”* As a result, in parallel with the start of training in July and August, managers are already beginning to recruit marabouts who are reputed to be good or match-winners. *“It’s a time when managers are trying to convince good players from other teams to play for their ASCs and to dissuade those who want to leave. The top managers no longer sleep properly. Also, members of the Mystical Commissions make them numerous proposals to enlist marabouts and fetishists to prepare their teams for competitions”*. In short, this situation bears witness to the almost irreversible integration of occult practices into the “navétane” movement, where they have become almost indispensable. The vast majority of players irreversibly link Navétane football to Xonjom. One might even wonder whether training has priority over other aspects such as the Xonjom.

⁴“Samp”: mystical preparation for a solid future.

In addition, the most widespread conception in this “navétane” movement is that matches should be played on two (2) fronts, namely:

- the technical/tactical front, which is a matter for the coaches and players. This mainly involves physical preparation, setting up playing systems, seeing how the players complement each other, psychological aspects, etc. In short, it involves applying the principles of training as recommended in STAPS. In short, it’s about applying the principles of training as recommended in STAPS. It is mainly marked by groupings for training sessions, pre-match groupings and match times on the pitch. These groupings are clearly identified and their duration is well defined;
- the mystical front, where activities take place before, during and after each match. They take up much more time than the training sessions and matches. In fact, the members of the “X” Committee prepare the matches just after the draw to determine the fixture schedule. They collect the first names and surnames of the opposing teams’ players, give them to the occultists and make a point of following their instructions to the letter. *“We sometimes pull all-nighters to carry out the marabouts’ instructions. We take a lot of risks to bury things in cemeteries, in the competition area, etc. During training sessions, the players spend much more time taking baths than listening to the coaches. Just before going out on the pitch, there are sometimes things to do, and so on. When the “navétanes” start, we have more time to do other things, not even to concentrate on our professional activities. To tell the truth, the mystical preparation time is much longer than the training time.”*

Clearly, the rationalist logic that calls for training and technical, tactical and psychological preparation is accompanied by mystical practices that are deeply integrated into “navétane”. The latter tend to take up much more of the players’ time than the activities governed by the STAPS.

In short, the “Xonjom” are considered an integral part of the “Navétane” movement by the various players. Its irreversible nature can be explained by the fact that it is rooted in society through education, that it is considered to be the charm of the movement, and above all by the fact that it occupies much more of the players’ time than the purely scientific aspects of training, which logically lead to performance.

3.3. “Xonjom” More Important than Training in Determining Success?

“Navétane football”, as a specific sporting practice, is part of the coherence of traditional society and has now become a practice in which the players are obliged to combine the “objective” dimension (training) with the “subjective” dimension (mysticism). It is with this in mind that some have shown that, in this oppositional and collective sport, training and “xons” coexist in the quest for performance. *We train every day, but we are obliged to engage in mystical practices to win our matches, because training alone cannot guarantee a result. The players believe too much in the “xon”, which is why even during training the*

managers have to go and see the marabouts (...). At Navétane, the “xons” and training go hand in hand, and the players attach great importance to them. This version of the coaches seems to be shared by the players. Indeed, in their comments on the matter, the players say that “on a day when there’s no Xonjom, we consider that we’re much closer to defeat than to victory. That’s in our heads. Psychologically, we’re not at ease. We interpret the slightest bad action on the pitch or the slightest injury by the fact that we didn’t do Xons. As a result, we take it out on the managers. It’s fundamental, the Xons protect us and help us win”.

On the other hand, and in a more nuanced way, some of them maintain: “*We are aware that to win you have to work...do training sessions. But we need the second force to win. It helps us in many ways, to protect the players, build up their confidence and above all help them win matches for the good of the district. That’s why the whole neighbourhood is involved in finding a marabout... quests are organised in all the houses.*” They are aware of the mystical dimension, but are always aware of the need to complement rational training activities with mystical *ones in order to achieve* “football performance, the complexity of which is linked to the enthusiasm generated by this popular sport, but also to the impact of the environment” J. F. Gréhaigne [12]. To win matches, all means are good. And the almost unanimous orientation of the players is that of mystical practices. They believe in the image of the “xonjom” without obscuring the essential dimension of the activity.

In addition, the leaders of the “navétane” movement, convinced of the effectiveness of occult practices, made statements to players and coaches to reassure them of their commitment to mysticism. “*You, the players and staff, take care of the training sessions, we, the directors, will do the rest (...). All we ask is that you play and leave the mystique to us, because you need to concentrate on the matches. You’re not the only ones playing. We play the matches before you go out on the pitch. Sometimes we know the results before the matches start. So everyone has to play their part and we’ll win (...)*”.

In short, mystical practices have become so internalised as luckmakers and match-winners that they take up all the space in psychological preparation. While some players place them ahead of training, others argue that they complement rational aspects. In zone 2B of Ziguinchor, none of the players in the “navétane” movement invalidate the “Xonjom”.

3.4. When the Instructions of Marabouts Take Precedence over Those of Technicians

In Senegalese society, the behaviour and actions of individuals are generally explained according to deterministic logics that largely escape our consciousness. All actions, whether rationally generated or not, find justification in the mystical. As a result, “sporting successes and/or failures are interpreted as the consequences of mystical practices. Nothing happens on its own, everything has a link with mysticism, be it happiness or, above all, unhappiness” I. Sow [10]. This is

how seriously the actors of the “navétane” movement take occultism. The words of the marabouts sound like directives, without strict adherence to which misfortune in the form of bad luck, defeat and/or injury is integrated into the collective consciousness as the main cause. *“The marabout asks for the list 48 hours before the match in order to make the “listikhar”⁵, which leads the coach to anticipate handing over the 18 players who are going to play in the match... he even gives the colour of the jersey that the team is going to wear”*. In practical terms, the players on the pitch receive two types of instructions: those of the coaches and other technicians and those of the occultists consulted via the members of the “Xon” committee. When asked which ones they follow most, the players are categorical: *“What do you want us to do? Even the coaches encourage us to respect the maraboutic directives. Several times, in the middle of a session to explain the playing systems, while everyone was concentrating, the members of the X committee interrupted the session to ask us to go and have a bath because it was the time indicated by the occultists to do so. The coaches stop the session immediately and demand that we go and do it (...). They themselves sometimes beat us to the bath. Sometimes the marabouts have even told us what colours of swimming costume to wear”*.

Better still, types of behaviour and attitudes such as *“sleep on a mat spread out directly on the tiles the night before the match”*, *“do not wave at anyone who is not a member of the team”*, *“do not go through the main door of the stadium, jump the walls to get into the stadium”*, *“make sure you have the last player to enter the pitch before kick-off”*, etc., are all taught to the players by the occultists. So, in groups, the occultists’ instructions seem to take precedence over those given by the technicians.

During matches, coaches and players also receive mystical instructions and carry them out. Occultists make predictions, claiming to have seen the match before it actually takes place. If need be, the members of Commission X do not hesitate to tell the coaches the score of the match, with instructions to be followed which, according to the standards, fall within the remit of the technicians. *“Our game plans are sometimes turned upside down because the marabouts demand that we play players with the number X when it’s not on our books. They tell us that the star of victory is on him; to replace the best player in our team in the middle of a match to avoid a red card; etc.”*

In fact, trainers and marabouts represent two opposing poles in “navétanes”. The former hold a technical type of sporting capital (sanctioned by a diploma issued) governed by Sciences et Techniques des Activités Physiques et Sportives (STAPS) and the latter, a mystically characterised magico-religious capital. In reality, the representatives of these two poles are not in conflict, but maintain a complementary relationship, with a predominance of respect for the instructions of the mystics to the detriment of those of the technicians. Better still, the latter are resigned to this situation, to which they adhere, explaining: *“We certainly*

⁵“listikhar”: to look, to consult the future.

believe in it, but the marabout also helps us psychologically, because the players believe in the mystics, and if they don't, they risk being affected psychologically... the Mara⁶ tells us the score and even the name of the goalscorer... he protects us...he helps us gain confidence... Sometimes, before the match, the marabout comes to the training centre to talk to us. He does things in front of us that motivate us and above all reassure us before we go out on the pitch. We pay more attention to this talk than to the staff briefing... That's why we coaches agree to stop what we're doing and do what they tell us to do. In "navétane" in Ziguinchor in particular, victories are the result of mystical practices and technical activities". In fact, "mystical practices galvanise players while intimidating opponents. They are part of a psychological war or 'psychological warfare'. It is widely accepted in 'navétanes' that it is the marabouts who win the matches" H. Dieng [7].

In short, the centrality of mystical practices in the "navétane" movement in Ziguinchor in particular can be seen in the priority given to the instructions of occultists to the detriment of those of technicians. This situation is due to the transfer of socially internalised beliefs into the field of sport and the psychological effect they have on player management. They completely replace the work of the psychologist.

4. Discussion

The debate on popular sport, of which the "navétane" is an integral part, is approached from several angles by the authors. On the one hand, in the form of a plea, J. Dumazedier *et al.* [13], having noted the development of mass sport, proposed "a fresh look at sport that is inclusive and open to all cultures". In the same vein, P-A Lebecq [14] studied affinity movements in sports and physical education in relation to popular education. On the other hand, "Karate, kung fu, etc. are culturally linked to the Sino-Nipponese world. Chaoling temples combine martial arts, mastery of the body, philosophy and religion" D. Carradine [15]. It's a question of cultural affirmation through sport. From another angle, cultural elements are transposed into "institutionalised competitive sport" in the sense of P. Parlebas [4]. This is the case with occult practices used to obtain victory. They are studied from descriptive F. D. Loum [6], psychological B. Malinowski [16] and other angles. However, the question of the place of these occult practices in popular sport such as "navétanes" seems very marginal in these works. This study is a contribution to understanding the weight of occultism in this sport, particularly in football, which is supposed to be governed by the objective rules of training and STAPS performance in a locality (Ziguinchor) reputed to be mystical.

In addition, we did collect data that enabled us to understand the extent of occult practices in "navétane" football, but only with coaches and members of the X Commissions. This poses a problem of completeness, because in the

⁶"Mara": Short for marabout.

course of the investigation we realised that these hidden practices also involve players and certain supporters.

Finally, contradictory opinions, albeit in the minority, were identified during the surveys and have not been analysed in this work. Taking them into account could help put the truths we have arrived at into perspective.

5. Conclusion

“Navétane” is closely linked to the socio-cultural realities of the neighbourhoods. As a result, it incorporates occult practices, which play a major role in the sport, while at the same time giving rise to a number of problems, namely the interest that the players have in this practice, but above all the place occupied by mysticism in this popular sport, where the scientific aspects seem to be relegated to second place. The “xonjom” is, in fact, much in demand by the “navétane” players, especially when preparing for matches. This situation is highlighted by the creation of a commission in charge of mysticism in each of the ASCs in Ziguinchor. Better still, this committee occupies a central position in the management of these ASCs, even though they are formally illegal. Their members make many sacrifices to consult occultists and to ensure that their instructions are strictly followed. The importance accorded to occult practices is further reinforced by the fact that they are irreversible, given the degree of belief and, above all, its social roots. In this area, they are seen as vectors of success and protection. As a result, the directives of occultists carried by themselves or by members of X commissions tend to be prioritised over training governed by the scientific rules of STAPS. What’s more, mystical practices are even seen as an element that gives meaning to this popular sports movement which, in the specific case of zone 2B of Ziguinchor, is validated by virtually all the players, *i.e.* the players, coaches, managers and supporters. Ultimately, the predominance of occult practices is exacerbated by the clash between mystical aspects and technical instructions, with the occult directives always gaining the upper hand. To put it plainly, the activities of marabouts and fetishists virtually replace, at many points in the team’s preparation, the determined work of psychologists and other technicians in particular.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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