

1 **KOKOROGO OR KURUMBA WRESTLING IN BURKINA FASO: AN ATYPICAL**
2 **TRADITIONAL PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ON THE VERGE OF DISAPPEARING**

3 **ABSTRACT**

4 In the Lorum provinces of Burkina Faso, people engaged in traditional games and
5 physical activities to fill their leisure time or recreation. One such activity is wrestling, a
6 recreational sport practiced and passed down through generations among the Kurumba or
7 Fulcé people. By focusing on this traditional Kurumba wrestling, our objective is to
8 understand the socio-cultural functions it fulfills within the Kurumba community. Semi-
9 structured interviews and observations were used to collect data. The research reveals that
10 traditional Kurumba wrestling reflects the Kurumba people's identity and serves as a channel
11 for cultural and religious socialization. However, the results also show that this ancestral
12 practice is disappearing despite its core values. The research suggests revitalizing it through
13 codification to establish it as a local sport, followed by its integration into school curricula.

14 **Keywords:** Kokorogo, wrestling, kurumba, tradition, socio-cultural functions

15 **INTRODUCTION**

16 Like other peoples around the world, African peoples engage in traditional physical
17 activities, sometimes seasonal or periodic, that allow them to flourish. Indeed, Zongo (2019,
18 p. 1) reports that in Africa, and more specifically in Burkina Faso, these physical activities
19 and games are organized periodically in time and space, sometimes with social constraints. A
20 case in point is traditional wrestling, or Kokorogo, in Kurumba country, an atypical practice
21 that can be likened to other types of wrestling found in various regions of Burkina Faso.
22 These direct, hand-to-hand combat encounters pose significant challenges, resulting in the
23 quest for victory and the title of "king of the arena," thus attracting valiant young and old
24 from all Kurumba villages, who express their thirst for supremacy.

25 These seasonal gatherings, organized between populations of neighboring villages and
26 drawing crowds to the arenas, are of paramount importance to the local populations and help
27 fulfill a certain social need.

28 Thus, one might seek to understand the social and cultural functions of this ancestral
29 practice, known as kokorogo, which attracts such large crowds in Kurumba country. We
30 posited that Kurumba wrestling contributes to socialization, the performance of religious
31 practices, entertainment, self-affirmation, the strengthening of social bonds and cohesion, as
32 well as the exchange of women. However, it is tending to disappear due to several factors that
33 negatively impact its survival. To answer our question, we traveled to Kurumba country
34 where we conducted semi-structured and repetitive individual interviews. As JP points out...
35 Following O. de Sardan (1995), we felt that this interview format was likely to provide us
36 with more in-depth information, given the freedom of interaction between the participants
37 (interviewee and interviewer). Due to the security situation, we had to contact some of our
38 target audience by telephone. We also used observation as a data collection technique. Content
39 analysis was recommended for data processing. This allowed us to understand the social and
40 cultural functions of this indigenous physical practice of Kurumba, as well as its specific way
41 of being performed. This research is structured around two essential points: the theoretical

42 framework and methodology, which constitute the first, and the results and discussion, which
43 constitute the second.

44 **I- THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY**

45 This section consists of the theoretical framework, which we will address first, and the
46 methodology, which will follow.

47 **1- Theoretical Framework**

48 The theoretical model of this research stems from the work of Pierre Parlebas entitled
49 *Traditional Games, Sports and Cultural Heritage*, published in 2016 by L'Harmattan.
50 Following Mauss (1950), Parlebas (2016) argues that bodily techniques are specific to each
51 society. Multiple different cultures correspond to a multitude of dissimilar games: each
52 physical game constitutes an ethno-motor activity. They therefore reflect the cultural identities
53 of communities and enrich the cultural heritage of humanity. They are eminently cultural
54 phenomena, mirrors of the societies to which they belong, which guide them according to
55 their own aspirations for development. However, for Parlebas, socio-cultural upheavals,
56 particularly the global spread of the institutionalized sports system, threaten the disappearance
57 of traditional games. In this sense, Ouédraogo (2022) argues that Pierre Parlebas's theoretical
58 approach applies to all ancestral ludomotor practices, such as traditional Burkinabè wrestling,
59 which are struggling to regain their former prestige today. From this perspective, it is
60 necessary to reflect on ways to safeguard them.

61 **2- Methodological approach**

62 Our main objective in this study is to understand Kurumba or Kokorogo wrestling in
63 all its cultural, sociological, anthropological, historical, and other aspects. This research is
64 qualitative in nature and was conducted in the Lorum province, the study area. This reflection,
65 which attempts to understand traditional Kurumba wrestling, will be analyzed descriptively
66 and analytically in order to examine its content, functions, and roles within Kurumba
67 communities.

68 Our target audience consists of young wrestling practitioners, as well as traditional
69 chiefs (land chiefs) and traditional leaders from the various villages of Lorum, custodians of
70 tradition, administrative authorities, cultural facilitators, and resource persons likely to
71 possess information on traditional wrestling practiced in Lorum. The sampling was conducted
72 among young and former wrestlers from the Lorum province, as well as members of the
73 traditional wrestling troupe from the commune of Sollé who have participated in some
74 editions of the National Culture Week (SNC) in Bobo-Dioulasso, which has hosted this
75 cultural event since 1990. This troupe allowed us to witness firsthand a simulated kurumba
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84 cultural event since 1990. This troupe allowed us to witness firsthand a simulated kurumba
85 wrestling match.

86 **2.1. Who are the Kurumba?**

87 The Kurumba are an indigenous community inhabiting the northern part of Burkina
88 Faso, in the Lorum province, located approximately 260 km from Ouagadougou, the capital.
89 This region is home to three main ethnic groups: the Mossi, the Kurumba (or Fulani), and the
90 Fulani. The capital of the Lorum province is Titao. According to R. S. Hughes (2022), the
91 Kurumba are Nionissé, one of the indigenous peoples of our country. They are found
92 throughout Burkina Faso, although many have lost their identity and no longer recognize
93 themselves as such. This is due to the fact that their language, the vehicle of their culture, is
94 dying out. Today, it is only spoken in Namsiguia, Pobé-Mengao, Arbinda, Tulfé, and other
95 areas. In Bourzanga, for example, only elders still speak it, evidence of the gradual decline of
96 this means of communication. R. S. Hugues reveals that the Bèerba or Nionissé and the
97 Tansoba belong to this community. "Many kings in our country are supported by the
98 Nionissé and the Tansoba," he adds, "which proves the importance of this community. There
99 are at least a hundred surnames that designate them in our country." As examples, he cites
100 Sawadogo, Badini, Niampa, Tao, Komi, Ganamé, Porgo, Younga, Ouéremi, Warma, etc.
101 "When you lose your language, you lose your culture, and your roots are part of it. This is
102 why many don't know they are 'Kurumba.'" All this to emphasize the importance of this
103 community, which is largely unknown today.

104 **2.2. Origin of Kurumba Wrestling**

105 Kurumba wrestling, also known as kokorogo wrestling, is a unique type of wrestling
106 competition. It is practiced in the northern region of Burkina Faso, in the Lorum province.
107 Kurumba wrestling takes place under the moonlight at the end of the harvest season. The
108 village clearing serves as the arena for the wrestlers. However, children play wherever the
109 opportunity arises. Kurumba wrestling is one of the tactics used by humans to defend
110 themselves against wild animals and against other humans. For TAO Yacouba, it represents
111 the struggle for the survival of the Kurumba people. This is reflected in the writings of Zongo
112 (2019, p. 149), who observes that wrestling has served not only as a weapon but also as a tool
113 for peacefully resolving disputes between two rivals or rival groups over a conflict. According
114 to LassanéSigué, a wrestling coach in the region: in the good old days, these were amazing
115 moments of expressing joy and bringing young people together. It was important to show
116 everyone that you were a man full of vitality, vigor, and courage.

117

118 **2.3. Description of Kurumba or Kokorogo**

119 Wrestling The major wrestling matches organized by elders or youth had a special and
120 solemn character. Kokorogo consists of grabbing the opponent, throwing them to the ground,
121 and pinning them at least twice before the watchful referees declare the winner.

122 Before the matches begin, a referee stands in the middle of the arena and plants a stick
123 in its center. From this moment, the referee signals the start of the competition, and the
124 hostilities can begin. The bravest young man steps into the arena and knocks the stick down.
125 With this gesture, he sends a message of challenge to all those present, young and old, who
126 are capable of rising to the challenge.

127 The one who feels capable of rising to the challenge emerges from the crowd and
128 enters the arena like a spirited bull. The referee then proceeds with the confrontation phase.
129 He takes each wrestler by the arm to present them to the public before they face off in the
130 fight. The referee is, however, obligated to stop the fight at any time if he notices any danger
131 to one of the challengers.

132 Kurumba wrestling sometimes begins on the ground and continues standing, unlike
133 other types of wrestling such as Moose, San, Gurunsi, etc. The ultimate goal of Kurumba
134 wrestling is to bring the opponent to the ground and subdue him. Sometimes, to be more
135 convincing, the victor taunts his defeated opponent by placing a handful of dust on his chest
136 to demonstrate his supremacy.

137 To simulate a traditional Kurumba wrestling match, we had the opportunity to witness
138 a demonstration during National Culture Week in Bobo-Dioulasso.

139 The young wrestlers tentatively entered the arena to warm up, while elderly men with
140 flowing beards performed dance steps to the rhythm of the griots' instruments and reenacted
141 wrestling scenes. These were nostalgic veteran wrestlers reminiscing about a distant but still
142 cherished past.

143 The old griots, equipped with horns, drums, armpit drums, tambourines, and the
144 kokorogo, accompanied the young wrestlers in the arena to the frenetic rhythm of traditional
145 Kurumba music.

146 During the wrestling matches, the sounds played by the griots help to awaken all the
147 wrestlers' senses. These sounds sometimes convey praise for the wrestlers present,
148 galvanizing them like soldiers on the front lines. A perfect symbiosis develops between the
149 wrestlers and the griots, establishing communication and a shared understanding that
150 influences the outcome of the match.

151 TAO Issoufou, originally from the Titao region, explains that "going to the kokorogo"
152 is a term that symbolizes wrestling and means, for children, "to wrestle to determine the
153 winner." This used to take place in the pastures while sheep, goats, and cows grazed
154 peacefully.

155 Sigué Abdou, well into his sixties, recalls that in happier times, competitions were
156 organized between villages on the border between Burkina Faso and Mali. But he laments the
157 current phenomenon of terrorism, which has forced a significant number of villages to
158 flee. "This situation no longer even allows us to make a living, let alone engage in these kinds
159 of activities," he laments.

160

161 **2.4. The Instruments**

Accompanying Wrestling Matches in the Lorum The musical instruments accompanying the wrestlers in the Lorum consist of the bargo (horn), the lunga (armpit drum), and the kokorogo (hollow drum without a membrane).

These instruments primarily serve as means of communication and communion during wrestling competitions. These musical instruments are not sacred. The griots bring them out for the occasion to galvanize the wrestlers.

2.4.1. The Armpit Drum or Lunga

The armpit drum is a membranophone, a small instrument held under the armpit. It produces a melody that gives meaning to the lives of the wrestlers. This is the instrument most often used by griots to praise the wrestlers and galvanize them.

2.4.2. The Kokorogo

The kokorogo is a hollow instrument carved from a tree trunk but not covered with a membrane (animal skin). The kokorogo has a dual meaning and multiple uses. Traditionally, the kokorogo serves as a watering trough for animals. Thus, old kokorogo (watering troughs) are used as musical instruments to accompany the wrestling matches. Used frequently in Kurumba wrestling matches, the kokorogo gradually came to mean "wrestling" itself among the Kurumba people. This is why the Kurumba people often confuse wrestling with the kokorogo drum. When used as a communication or musical instrument, drummers use sticks to strike the edges of the hollow part, producing a dry, resonant sound. It is an instrument used solely in popular celebrations and therefore has no sacred character. It is a secular instrument used by any member of the Kurumba community. This instrument is used, among other musical instruments, to praise wrestlers. Ultimately, the kokorogo symbolizes wrestling, and wrestling is known as kokorogo among the Kurumba.

2.4.3. The Horn

The horn is a wind instrument made from a cow horn with a hole in the middle for blowing. It is both a sacred and secular instrument. It is used in religious ceremonies, but also in certain recreational activities such as wrestling.

2.4.4. The Kundé or traditional guitar

The kundé is an instrument that also accompanies wrestling among the Kurumba people. It is a guitar with two strings that the player plucks to produce a soft, poetic, and melodious sound that soothes the wrestlers. It praises the wrestlers, which in turn motivates them, causing them to redouble their efforts and sometimes raise the level of competition.

2.5. The Social, cultural, and religious functions of kurumba

Wrestling Here, we will first address the social functions and then the cultural and religious functions of Kurumba wrestling.

2.5.1. Social functions

200 Traditional physical activities such as wrestling in the Lorum region embody
201 numerous social values and contribute to strengthening social bonds and community life,
202 fostering solidarity, cooperation, camaraderie, and so on.

203 Indeed, according to the practitioners we interviewed, these practices promote
204 community life, strengthen social ties, encourage mutual support, and promote mutual aid, all
205 to the benefit of the individual and the entire community.

206 Our findings are consistent with those of Parlebas (2016, p. 35), who finds that sports
207 play a potential role in the functioning of society and in the development of citizens. Our
208 results corroborate those of Bouzoungoula (2012, p.82) who recognizes that the game
209 conveys certain ancestral values.

210 **2.5.2. Cultural and religious functions: preparation for the wrestling match**

211 The wrestling match, or kokorogo, must be announced by the custodians of tradition at
212 the appropriate time. These custodians take the necessary steps to ensure that festive events
213 like wrestling matches do not encounter any unfortunate incidents, whether for the wrestlers
214 or the spectators.

215 Like other activities in life, wrestling matches require preparation. This preparation
216 consists of libations, sacrifices, and enemas with various magical potions to ward off evil
217 spirits. For the wrestlers, this is about protecting themselves against the "evil eye," but also
218 about securing victories. The same applies to the arena, which must be prepared to protect the
219 wrestlers and sometimes the spectators. This is what we take away from Zongo (2019, p. 155)
220 who notes that "the lenga or arena must be prepared to protect the wrestlers and the spectators
221 from any danger. Libation rituals are performed on the lenga to open the festivities of the
222 year."

223 The practical organization of the wrestling matches then involved periodic rituals to
224 ward off bad luck and thank the gods for bountiful harvests.

225 This is what emerges from the words of Marou Badini of Bourzanga: "We organize
226 the kokorogo mainly during prosperous times. It's when our bellies are full that we can have
227 fun. [laughs]. So when there are good harvests, we thank the ancestors for the season."

228 Our findings align with those of During (2016, p. 63) when he states that: "Victory is
229 dedicated to the gods: they will ultimately have been its architects. The outcome of the
230 matches is indeed revealing of the gods' disposition, good or bad, towards a city."

231 **2.5.3. The Functions of socialization or integration of the individual into society**

232 Traditional games and physical activities contribute to learning the norms and values
233 of the society to which one belongs, or more generally, the norms and values promoted by
234 society, and contribute to the integration of the individual into their community, thus making
235 them useful. This is what emerges from the words of Abdoulaye Komi of Sollé: "When we
236 gather at the kokorogo, beyond mere entertainment, it is about strengthening social bonds and
237 living together for the well-being of the population; we find opportunities to communicate
238 with each other." Our results align with Parlebas (2016, p. 11) when he argues that:
239 "Traditional games are the living memory of local customs. Witnesses to the norms and
240 values of their community, traditional games are like the emblem of cultures."

242 **2.5.4. Entertainment functions**

243 Here, entertainment refers to a time of relaxation after hard work. The agricultural
244 work that has occupied the population's time for approximately five months requires a period
245 of respite. Popular celebrations such as customary and religious festivals, traditional games,
246 dances, and even other physical activities contribute to the population's entertainment after the
247 agricultural work.

248 Badini Salam, an elder from Bourzanga, reveals: "In our time, we didn't have as many
249 distractions as we do today. Young people eagerly awaited the wrestling season to entertain
250 themselves and find fulfillment."

251 Our findings corroborate those of During (2016, p. 74), who maintains that:

252 As for traditional games, they continue to thrive and evolve. More flexibly and
253 diversely codified, they reflect regional particularities and identities. More complex in their
254 execution, less focused on the score than on the significance of roles and sequences, they
255 prioritize the enjoyment of the activity over the spectacle, and the participation of all over the
256 achievements of a few.

257

258 **2.5.4. The Functions of personality development and self-assertion**

259 Personality development allows for broader and freer social participation and a
260 disinterested cultivation of the body, sensitivity, and reason, beyond practical and technical
261 training. (Dumazedier, 1988) Personality is formed through interaction with peers, by
262 regularly learning about life, and by listening attentively to and observing what elders say and
263 do.

264 Young people in the various regions of Lorum, by engaging in wrestling or Kokorogo,
265 strengthen their physique, forge their morale, competence, and expertise in competition, but
266 also measure themselves against others and assert their personality. The words of Salam of
267 Sollé speak volumes in this regard: "Young people who meet in Kokorogo when they wrestle
268 become more courageous and become Men."

269 Our results are consistent with those of Zongo (2019), who state that: "wrestling is a
270 physical activity and, like other physical activities related to combat events, contributes to the
271 exaltation of the beauty of the body, its sublimation, the relationship between people, self-
272 affirmation through acts of bravery, and also contributes to the search for harmony between
273 body and mind and with the environment." Kurumba wrestling is an example of this.

274 But as noted above, games and physical practices like Kurumba wrestling are tending
275 to disappear due to several factors.

276 This is what Vigne and Dortier (2009, p. I) lament, noting that: "Traditional games and
277 sports, which are part of our ethnomotor heritage and represent a symbol of the cultural
278 diversity of our societies, have been supplanted during the last century by modern sports,
279 international physical exercise games of a global level, of which the Olympic Games or
280 specialized World Championships are emblematic representatives."

281

282 **2.5.5. Rewards for the winners**

283 There were no material or financial rewards for the winners of kurumba wrestling.
284 Instead, the victors received wives as trophies.

285 The brave old men in their seventies, some of whom received wives as rewards during
286 their glory days, remember it as if it were yesterday and still dance to the rhythm of the
287 kokorogo. "I got my wife during a wrestling match when I twice knocked down a renowned
288 wrestler from a neighboring village," admits Issaka Komi, an elderly man of about 80 from
289 the village of Sollé.

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291 **2.5.6. Traditional wrestling as a collective consciousness, a factor of solidarity, 292 integration, and communication**

293 In Kurumba country, wrestling is a popular activity that draws upon several aspects of
294 life, such as the pursuit of graceful movement, self-affirmation, and the struggle for survival.
295 Beyond the physical individual, the practice of wrestling aims at social, economic, political,
296 and cultural objectives, among others. Our findings align with those of Zongo (2019) and
297 Vigne and Dortillé (2009, p. 1), who argue that: "Traditional games, like culinary arts,
298 architecture, or dialects, for example, bear witness to a culture specific to a particular
299 geographical area and affirm a regional identity. They belong to popular culture and are part
300 of humanity's historical heritage."

301 Kurumba or Kokorogo wrestling embodies numerous virtues and values, but this
302 practice, passed down to us by our ancestors, is disappearing, not only due to new forms of
303 entertainment, but also, and above all, due to the phenomenon of terrorism, which has
304 dispersed the population.

305 Wrestling, which once contributed to strengthening community spirit, solidarity,
306 camaraderie, social bonds, mutual aid, and mutual support, is no longer visible, but a distant
307 memory in Lorum.

308

309 **CONCLUSION**

310 Our aim in analyzing Kurumba or Kokorogo wrestling was to understand the
311 underlying reasons for its practice by a Kurumba population grappling with modernity and the
312 proliferation of readily available modern games and activities. We conducted interviews and
313 direct observations of wrestling matches during a demonstration at the National Culture Week
314 (SNC) in Bobo-Dioulasso. Our investigations revealed that Kurumba wrestling holds vital
315 importance for Kurumba communities as a traditional physical activity that fosters social,
316 cultural, and physical development, provides entertainment, strengthens social bonds, and
317 more.

318 However, with the rise of terrorism in the region and the abundance of modern games
319 and sports, this ancestral practice, if left unchecked, will inevitably disappear.

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