

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

ABSTRACT

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

I- THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

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

1- Theoretical Framework

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

2- Methodological approach

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

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

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2.1. Who are the Kurumba?

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

2.2. Origin of Kurumba Wrestling

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

2.3. Description of Kurumba or Kokorogo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.5.4. Entertainment functions

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

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

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

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

2.5.4. The Functions of personality development and self-assertion

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

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

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

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

This is what Vigne and Dortier (2009, p. 1) lament, noting that: "Traditional games and sports, which are part of our ethnomotor heritage and represent a symbol of the cultural diversity of our societies, have been supplanted during the last century by modern sports, international physical exercise games of a global level, of which the Olympic Games or specialized World Championships are emblematic representatives."

2.5.5. Rewards for the winners

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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