



*Sporting Aspirations: Wrestling, Football, and Neoliberal Subjectivity in Urban Senegal*

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On beaches, dusty football pitches, and sandy school courtyards across the Senegalese capital of Dakar, thousands of young men train every day in the hope of becoming professional athletes. Some of them want to become football players and earn contracts in the lucrative championships of the Global North. Others dream of becoming wrestlers, competing in front of huge local crowds in Senegal's wildly popular national sport of *lutte avec frappe* (wrestling with punches). The two sports, football and wrestling, are in many ways opposed to one another. While football presents itself as a modern and international pursuit, wrestling is resolutely oriented towards supposedly traditional values, steeped in ethnic lore and magico-religious practice. Despite these differences, however, the trajectories of the young men aspiring to make it in the two sports are remarkably similar. In both cases, pursuit of the dream requires immense physical effort and comes with a substantial social cost. And in both sports, the chances of sustained success are minimal – and the associated risks considerable.

In this thesis, I show that the sporting dream is a risk worth taking for many young men in a socio-economic context which offers little else in the way of future prospects. I follow the paths of the footballer Pape and the wrestler Modou, both in their early twenties, as they attempt to navigate their way towards sporting success while contending with the hardships and challenges of everyday life in Dakar. Through the lives and experiences of these and other young men, I argue that sport in Senegal is a site in which a form of neoliberal subjectivity is produced. The comparison between football and wrestling provides two distinct, yet complementary accounts of how this may happen. At a football school, institutional discipline and a rhetoric of 'self-improvement' is applied to give young players hope of one day participating in the global market. Meanwhile, wrestlers have to rely on kinship, patronage, and other networks and alliances, as well as on their own entrepreneurship and performance of professional identities, to achieve success in what has increasingly become a commercial yet extremely precarious "sport-business". Following on from discussions of neoliberal subjectivity in post-industrial workplaces, I describe the emergence of an "athlete-self" – a reflexive, entrepreneurial athlete who treats his body as a business to be optimized and invested in. Despite the adoption of elements of a neoliberal subjectivity, they remain firmly on the margins, and subject to the logics of global and local markets, ideologies, and hierarchies. Ultimately, the quest to become a successful athlete is presented and enacted as a self-determined project, but in reality more closely resembles a process of 'lottery capitalism'.

One particular characteristic of the "athlete-self" is the highly embodied nature of its production. The athlete's body is not only the 'tool' or the site of production, but also the key site in which a neoliberal ethos is lived, invested in, and experienced. Senegalese athletes follow strict and intense regimes of training and fitness, and their bodies are the subject of both admiration and intense scrutiny. The body is also a site in which gendered ideals are produced, shaped, and expressed. I discuss the need for a fit or muscular body in the context of what has been described as an ongoing 'crisis of masculinity' in contemporary Senegal. As economic success and the fulfillment of adult masculine ideals are further and further delayed, investing in having a masculine body seems to be a realistic and achievable goal.

Senegalese wrestling is not simply a test of strength, skill, and endurance between two physically imposing athletes. While the contestants do battle in the arena, their marabouts –syncretic spiritual consultants – are simultaneously engaged in combat. Crouched in their chambers surrounded by holy scripture, they utter Quranic phrases and incantations counted on prayer beads, summoning

divine powers to guide their clients to victory. This represents the climax of what is described as *guerre mystique* – a protracted campaign of ‘mystical warfare’ which begins when a wrestling fight is scheduled. In addition to their punishing physical preparation, wrestlers solicit the services of renowned marabouts, ostentatiously spending vast sums of money on an arsenal of amulets, potions, and animal sacrifices which enable them to win. In football, a different ‘mystical war’ is being waged. In 2013, the Senegalese Football Federation announced a ban on all occult activities inside stadia, ostensibly responding to a flurry of violent maraboutic incidents between opposing fans. As globally affiliated football institutions stamp out the very same practices which are celebrated as cultural heritage in the wrestling milieu, sport emerges as a site of contestation in a social landscape seemingly marked by tensions between traditional beliefs and notions of modernity. Comparing the magico-religious practices of aspiring wrestlers and footballers reveals this to be a false dichotomy. Instead of choosing between ‘mystical/traditional/village’ and ‘rational/modern/urban’ trajectories, athletes strategically draw upon both to manage the often contradictory expectations placed upon them by their coaches, peers, and families. Such are the multiple logics which athletes must negotiate in the neoliberal era.

In the Senegalese capital, Dakar, rapid urbanization and Wolofization have gone hand in hand with the formation of de-ethnicized urban subjectivities. Young Dakarois in particular cultivate hybrid identities which draw upon Islamo-Wolof practices and global popular culture, while ethnic and linguistic differences become less important. This shift towards Wolofized urban identities is accompanied by the commonly voiced perception that urban youth are increasingly alienated from ancestral cultural practices. However, the hugely popular spectator sport of *lutte avec frappe* – traditional wrestling with punches – challenges this dichotomy by drawing upon an eclectic array of global, Islamic, and traditional symbols and practices. Although the sport is primarily practiced in the urban arenas of Dakar, the elaborate spiritual-mystical preparation required of its protagonists compels them to strategically evoke ethnic affiliations and solicit village support. Wrestling thus emerges as a site of re-ethnicization, encouraging young athletes to ‘rediscover’, engage with, and deploy commodified ethnic identities – ostensibly in order to improve their chances of sporting recognition and success, but also to foster a connection with an imagined ancestral origin. As the de facto national sport, wrestling effectively narrates the multi-ethnic Senegalese nation; however, it also reconfigures ethnicity by moving it beyond its political dimension and reconfiguring its association to spiritual and the mystical. The persistence of ethnicity in Senegalese wrestling points to the significance of sport in constructing narratives of belonging, and allows us to consider the complex relationship between ethnicity and nationalism in the postcolonial state.

Against a backdrop of sustained economic crisis and high unemployment, increasing numbers of young Senegalese men seek to capitalize on their athletic potential as a means to achieving social and economic success. The two largest sports industries in Senegal, football and wrestling, seem to be diametrically opposed in their orientation vis-à-vis desired forms of mobility. While footballers aim to play in professional leagues in Europe, wrestlers hope to move back and forth between training sojourns abroad, and competition in Senegal. I draw upon my ethnographic fieldwork with aspiring footballers and wrestlers in Dakar to examine how mobility is imagined and produced through the lens of two sports – one global, the other locally oriented. By teasing out the discourses, desires, and disappointments of these young men, I contribute to a growing body of work on athletic migration and its embeddedness both within local structures and the neoliberal global sports industries.

One empirical novelty of the thesis lies in the comparison of the hopes and trajectories of aspiring athletes in two Senegalese sports which on the surface appear to be diametrically opposed: traditional, locally oriented, and mystically saturated wrestling, versus the modern and globally oriented sport of association football. While there are certainly differences in the way the two sports are organized and practiced, the ethnographic research presented here suggests that the often-implied binaries do not hold up to scrutiny.

Instead, the comparison of two different sports points to the heterogeneous and contradictory nature of neoliberalism in Senegal, a location on the margins of the global economy. In chapters 1 and 2, I identify sport as a key site in which neoliberal subjectivity (the “athlete-self”) is produced, in particular through the disciplining of and investment in the (gendered, male) body. This is perhaps not surprising in the case of football where market logics have long since acquired a hegemonic status, but perhaps somewhat unexpected in wrestling – a sport which trades heavily upon its ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’ values. Crucially, these neoliberal subjectivities are produced in the context of historical and local specificities – as becomes particularly apparent in chapters 3 (on maraboutic economies and magico-religious practices) and 4 (on ethnicity and the nation). The final chapter follows the aspirations of mobility which invariably accompany dreams of athletic success. Here, mobility is revealed to be a project involving family, fantasy, and individual agency. The fact that wrestlers’ desire for transnational mobility matches that of footballers poses a challenge to established paradigms of athletic mobility.