

Women and Soccer in Africa: The example of 'The Black shafts' of Benin

Aurelio Berardi
University of Cotonou
1223 Cotonou
Bénin
Afrique

The first female soccer teams in West Africa appeared after the movement of declarations of independence of the West African states in the early 1960. Symptomatic of the status of the woman in contemporary African society, the case of the female football team of 'The Black shafts' of Benin is worthy of our attention.

The French took possession of the Dahomey in 1894, « colonial experience »¹. The Dahomey becomes a Republic in 1958 and gained access to its independence the 1th August 1960. From 1960 to 1972, the country faced several « coups d'État ». From 1972 to 1990, a Marxisme-Leninisme regime drills the country and introduces the « sport for the masses ». The Dahomey becomes « The Populaire Republic of Benin » in 1975². The conference of « Les Forces Vives de la Nation », cutting with communism, gives birth to « The Republic of Benin » in 1990. Significantly, the Constitution of the Republic of Benin stipulates that the State is in charge of preserving the « physical and moral health » of the family (art. 18). It is worth noting that the word « woman » is absent of the fourth « Charte des sports » of Benin (1991)³.

Born at the end of the 1980, 'The black shafts' of Cotonou, capital of Benin, won the first female national championship of soccer in 1992. We do not know much about 'The black shafts' of Cotonou. They are aged between 19 and 30 years old and are not taken especially

¹ Coubertin, Pierre de, « L'Évolution française sous la troisième République », *La Nouvelle Revue*, 18th year, t. 98, 15 feb. 1896 (pp. 708-723), I, « La nation armée », p. 720. Making allusion to « the Dahomey campaign » in *Une campagne de vingt-et-un ans* (1909), Coubertin quotes minister of education J. Simon referring to the « small french soldier who are making gymnastic in the Dahomey » (Cf. Müller et Rioux, *Pierre de Coubertin. Textes choisis*, 3 vol., éd. Weidmann, Zürich, C.I.O., Lausanne, 1986, t. 3, p. 111).

² Issued of the latin, *benignus* means « benevolent ». Medical term, the adjectiv « bénin » means today in french « without brutality ». The *Dictionnaire Universel* (1690) of A. Fureretière sends back to its first catharsistic fonction, to expulsion, to « remedy » ; is benin what « purges slowly » ; from the medical field, Fureretière goes to the cosmological one : benin is synonyme of « celestial influences » ; we are talking of « heavens » and « astral » benign presences (3 vol., ed. S.N.L. Le Robert, intr. A. Rey, Paris, 1978, art. « benin », 1 vol., A-D, without pagination). The *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1863-1873, *suppl.* 1880) of É. Littré, repeating this double cosmo-medical definition, adds a sexist remarque illustrated by the french father of church B. Bossuet : « We can see from history that benign is been used yesterday as a masculin. As a mater of fact, it is the name of men : Bénigne Bossuet » (7 vol., ed. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., J. Baudeneau, C. Bégué (dir.), Chigaco, 1994, t. I, art. « bénin », p. 494).

³ 1960 : first « charte des sports » (décret n° 420). 1964 : second « charte des sports » (décret n° 203). 1976 : third « charte des sports » (ordonnance n° 76-16, décret n° 76-86). 1991 : fourth « charte des sports » (décret n° 91-286). Benin counts today 17 sportive federations (football, athletism amateur, basketball, boxing, cycling, handball, judo, karaté amateur, lutte, sport scolaire and universitaire, taekwondo, tennis, bordtennis, volleyball, people with handicaps, kung fu, swimming). Seven of this federations are not declared and agreeded (boxing, lutte, tennis, volleyball, people with handicaps, kung fu, swimming). Source : *Match*, bimensuel béninois des sports, 4^e année, n° 0024, august 2005, p. 10.

seriously as people do not really consider them as professionals. Most of them stopped school early to help the domestic sphere controlled by the « xwétó »⁴, or « chief of the house » in the predominant language fon, one of the fifty-two national languages existing today in Benin.

The patriarchal society, the acceptance of polygamy, the unpredictable face of politics, the fear of HIV and AIDS, the instability of the economy, reduces today ‘The black shafts’ of Cotonou to indifference. Marginalized, discriminated, they receive no regular salary, depending always on the good will of the master. It is not difficult to see that ‘The black shafts’ of Cotonou are having a hard time in the recognition of their rights. The lack of access to food, medicine, education, water, with access often corrupted, accentuates the denial and manipulations of their rights. Associated to a social context, those frequent humiliations, when not physical, are soon becoming an unbearable psychological pressure. This mental factor in sport may help us in gaining a better understanding of the destiny of ‘The black shafts’ of Cotonou in identifying their real opponent. To the question: « against who ‘The black shafts’ of Cotonou are really fighting? » We can answer that ‘The black shafts’ are not only fighting against an external opponent, a visible one, at opening hours, but an aggressive one who insults them first of all internally.

In a religious country of vodu/voodoo (« spirit », « deity »), of animism inspiration, it is easy for a girl or a boy to be vulnerable psychologically⁵. It is a fact that today the word « sport » in Benin scares people; meanwhile the imported expression « physical education » does not. The first word is associated with the idea of « science »; it is immediately in conflict with the traditional religion associated with fetishism and black magic; whereas the second word is associated with tradition. At school in Benin, we do not do « sport », but « physical education ».

Illustrating this religious context of sport in Benin, the 45th anniversary Cup of Independence, which offered a football match between two male teams of Benin, was preceded by an opening match between women not covered by the media. This national event was put on behalf of the sign of « providentiality »⁶.

In light of this social and religious pressure, we will understand that the real opponent of ‘The black shafts’ of Cotonou is not only an immediate team of women, but a *suprateam* of old demons that will not go away existing in concrete terms called « Injustice », « Discrimination », « Psychological Violence ». These are symbolic names creating real and « symbolic wounds »⁷.

Unable to have their voices heard or speak too loud, not always in charge of strategic positions in the society: women in Benin are subordinated to men, a reality that may be extended to the rest of the African continent. This can make it difficult for any single female sportive team to grow.

⁴ Rassinoux, Jean, *Dictionnaire français-fon*, éd. Selva y Sabana, « Société des Missions Africaines », Madrid, 2000, art. « chef », p. 65.

⁵ Vodu is a contraction of the words « vodu » in ewe and « vodun » in fon, two national languages in Benin (ewe is also spoken in Togo).

⁶ *Match*, bimensuel béninois des sports, 4^e année, n° 0024, august 2005, p. 1.

⁷ Bettelheim, Bruno, *Les blessures symboliques. Essai d'interprétation des rites d'initiation*, éd. N.R.F. Gallimard, coll. « Connaissance de l'inconscient », trad. de l'anglais par C. Monod, Paris, 1971, chap. IX, « Les rites de filles », p. 166 (titre original : *Symbolic wounds*, The Free Press, 1954). « Play and recreation can help to heal emotional scars, and overcome traumas for people in situations of conflict, crisis or social tension » (The Magglingen Declaration, 18th feb. 2003).

The lecture of the story of ‘The black shafts’ has helped us to gain a better understanding of not only the meaning of soccer for women in Benin, but what might be the function of sport in Benin for men and women in general, a country where religion and society are of paramount importance : salvation and therapy, two key words of the UN campaign « 2005 year of sport and physical education » in favour of reducing poverty in the world.

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