

IN WEST AFRICA, GAMES, SPORT AND TRADITION



Sports and Physical Culture have solid roots in the history of African peoples.

The traditional culture of play and movement in West Africa offers obvious possibilities for an original “alternative” culture. But this culture, which in reality no longer exists in the primary sense of the word, is still too often observed in a selective and unverified manner, should not be overestimated ; still less should it be opposed in a critical way to the modern concept of sport and its administrators. It is more important to deduce from it, from the functional point of view, desirable patterns of human movement worthy of encouragement in the interests of modern-day social organization (Digel 1989 : 160).

By Michael Hirth

By traditional movement culture, we mean autonomous ludic and motor expression : games and dance such as they are traditionally practised by the indigenous populations of the rural regions of Western Africa. We also mean mental and family games, whose place in informal education remains considerable in this West African society. Also, we make so bold as to use the word sport in this context in the knowledge that the Conference of Ministers of Youth and Sport of the Economic Com-

munity of West African States (CMYS/ECOWAS) has decided to designate as such the traditional form of wrestling, (“... an authentically African sport, particularly popular among and practised by the peoples of the Sub-region.” (CMYS/ECOWAS 1986 : 1).

According to Melik-Chakhnazarov, “Physical culture and sport have solid roots in the history of the African peoples”. He states that physical exercises, games and

competitions date back to the very origins of the African continent, as attested by the ancient monuments. (Melik-Ch. 1970 :10). Rock paintings and engravings representing javelins, bows and arrows, running, leaping and throwing or scenes of combat or chase prove the existence of a purely African movement culture dating back to prehistoric times. Reference to "ideograms" (Diem 1971 3 :81-88) for precise motor processes does not necessarily establish a connection with the movement culture in Western Africa. However, worthy of note is the intense and living cultural relationship of the rural populations with their prehistory. In Mauritania and northern Niger - apart from the fact that the nomadic tribes still know well the art of rock paintings and engravings - we may recognize in prehistoric paintings depicting dance scenes the same choreography used today.

In western Africa, ludic and motor traditions are rich with a variety of games and dances from provinces having different historical and ethnic influences, but which, in all their multifarious variety and despite a considerable diversity of names and rules, appear to indicate common origins. For instance, the traditional hockey known as "Koura" among the Mauritians becomes "Towd" (Tague) among the Al Poulars of Fouta Toro and "Taronkoso" among the Mandigue in Casamance and Tambacouda in Senegal.

COMMON ORIGINS BETWEEN DIFFERENT CULTURES

Many games are linked to the geographical and socio-economic environment : camel races are popular in the nomadic regions of the north. In the agricultural provinces, horse, donkey and oxen races are more frequent, and equestrian festivals are organized for grand occasions. The fishermen on the great rivers of Western Africa and the peoples of the Atlantic coast are fully conversant with water games such as canoe or boat races. And there are hosts of other games based on imitation and movement.

Mental and family games, too, constitute a formidable repertoire which includes a large number of variations on the game of draughts. "Crou" or "Oumdiar" (mandiaré) are northern variants of "Wari" or "Mancala", generally known as "Awalé". Unicef observes that "Wari" is one of many identical games of draughts practised in several parts of the world." (Unicef 1979 : 20-24). Because of its wide distribution and great popularity, "Mancala" is often referred by researchers as the "African national game".

A glance at the traditions of games and movement in West Africa shows up with some clarity the concept of physical culture in its specific cultural and socio-economic context and in its particular local and



national forms. Moreover, comparison of games and their variants and different types of sport reveals a series of types common to traditional movements, games and cultural models. Despite the plurality of these traditional movement cultures, we can discern common characteristics. A number of mental games with constant rules, reflecting universal cultural models, constitute

Family mind games are numerous.



Exercises requiring little equipment.

intangible elements of informal elementary and family-based education. For this reason, the CMYS/ECOWAS wishes to extend this picture of games and movement culture to supra-regional level in order to establish an intercultural symbiosis throughout West Africa. This is an objective of definite political interest, already being looked into by means of studies which are, however, limited owing to insufficient resources.

From this complexity of cultural systems in West Africa, it is possible to draw conclusions which could help ECOWAS to establish a universal cultural schema. But the fact that no research has yet been done on the putative point of encounter of these different educational and training models means that promotion of the various traditional movement cultures is - with the exception of a detailed inventory - limited to support for cultural practices in a number of chosen provinces.

BACK TO TRADITION

Integration of West Africa into colonial empires was decisive for the previously autonomous development of play and

movement culture. The importance of the region's cultural profile began to give way to the influence of colonial educational structures. Having thus lost an element of their legitimation, namely the fact of representing a truly vernacular culture, traditional games and dances are also labouring under the disadvantage of being considered to belong to what is now seen as a second-class culture, as it were "cut-price sport".

In the mid-sixties, the failure of the modern educational system became manifest, as did the limited usefulness of high-performance sport in the face of the many fundamental needs still unsatisfied in the region. At the conferences in Accra (Ghana) in 1975 and Lagos (Nigeria) in 1976, and more particularly at the colloquium on "Black Civilization and Education" in Lagos in 1977, there were calls for a return to native resources. This call was reiterated by the CMYS in Cotonou (Benin) in Article II of its resolution of 13th May 1982, in which it sets out to promote traditional games and sports as a means of asserting cultural identity. In this connection, it is worth pointing out the pioneering role the

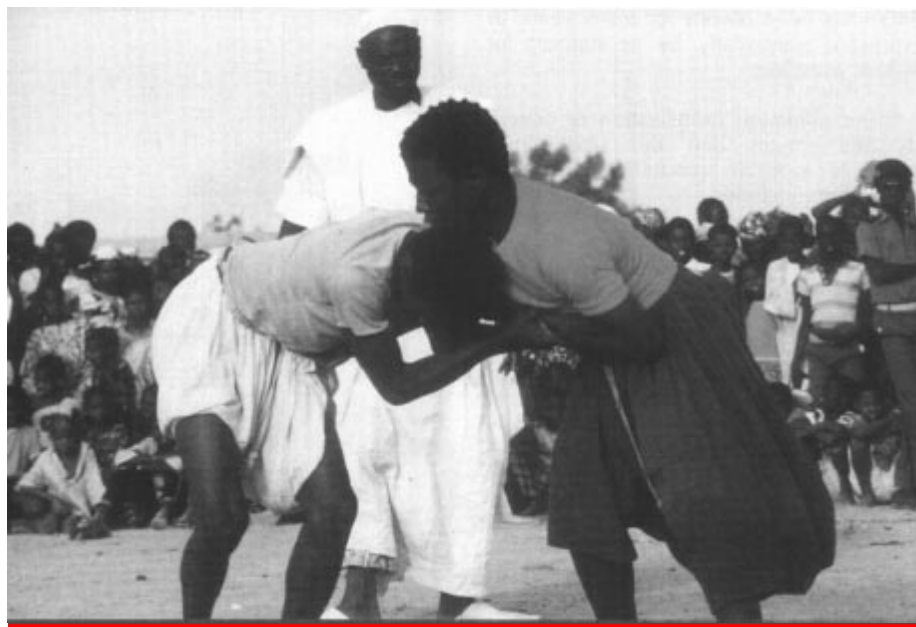
CMYS has been playing for many years, as expressed particularly by its support for African wrestling.

The minimum mobilization of materials and means and the scant local resources available predestine traditional movement cultures to application in schools and rural areas. However, this traditional approach frequently meets with resistance and criticism on the part of many sports administrators, who often come from a background of modern sports civilization, abundantly supplied with training facilities and equipment. This invariably results in a mistaken fixation with massive financial and material requirements as a precondition of any form of development aid. Such deployment of resources is largely unnecessary if support is given to the development of traditional forms of movement. Furthermore, a development of this kind would mean a loss of privileges for all those employed in the modern sports industry, since the specific knowledge required is already available and accessible to a not inconsiderable proportion of the indigenous population. This point is illustrated by the sports organizations which prefer to promote high-level competitive sport first of all, then sport for



Support for traditional movement cultures.





Traditional wrestling is considered as a sport.

all and leisure sport, conceding only in last place co-operation in the field of traditional games (Puronaho/Vuolle 1987 : 29-30).

We are witnessing a growing awareness of the potential of vernacular play and movement culture and its possibilities at local, regional and supraregional level. This tendency to reject western models in favour of a return to the efficacy of a vernacular form of physical culture is amply justified. Indeed, growing dependence on Olympism and the disappearance of traditional forms of play and movement are increasingly being perceived as a danger to this region's cultural life. We are seeing the quest for a cultural identity through autonomy and self-confidence, which goes hand in hand with a critical approach to the modern practice of sport, its barely financeable demands and its insignificant role in a development policy.

From the point of view of development understood in this way, it would seem necessary to support traditional movement culture. Indeed, if spontaneity and activity are features of an autonomous, living culture, their disappearance means a reduc-

tion in activities and reduced performance, signs of social lassitude and frustration (Eichberg 1975 : 19 - 20). The various rural areas can only be clearly identified if the cultural contributions they are offered can be naturally integrated into their vernacular behaviour. At least in certain areas, a recovery of traditional West African physical culture could contribute, in these rural areas, to the cultural edification and consolidation of these peoples' development.

POWERFUL TEACHING PROGRAMME

If we succeed in conserving culture, man's vital expression, in this way cultural identity will not be lost, and the conflict which has arisen between the traditional structure and modern behavioural patterns imposed from outside will ultimately resolve itself (Küper 1984 : 43).

From the point of view of elementary and preventive health-care, nutrition and the environment, participation in public life and mastery of cultural evolution, there is no shortage of arguments in favour of the

promotion of traditional physical culture and support for traditional games, which enhance agility and skills. There will probably be no immediate effects on employment, but it is well known that vocational training does not involve only the imparting of manual skills.

This idea that the promotion of sport carries strong development potential is firmly sustained by the CMYS/ECOWAS. Educational assistance, when allocated to elementary needs, does indeed increase the capacities of peoples, from the simplest community to the vastest region, enabling them to make use of their economic and cultural resources. This contribution in terms of (political) development potential provided by autonomous movement cultures under-constitutes a means of releasing under-utilized productive forces to provide (once more) material and cultural assets worthy of existence and vital to life. To quote Frantz Fanon : "African politicians should be concerned with training not

athletes but men who are aware and also athletic".

This being so, this educational concept as outlined here can become a powerful factor for regional valorization. In harmony as it is with the educational principles of large strata of the population because it belongs to Western African culture, to the preservation of which it can make a strong contribution, it carries the essential elements of physical education and sports curricula. Nor is it incompatible with the demands of the majority of the population. By virtue of its freedom from formalism and cumbersome materials, its institutional autonomy, its ecological interest and its cheapness to implement, it can help to improve the social situation of the ECOWAS countries with large rural populations by fostering grassroots participation, action and decision-making and creating a link between the traditional space and the technical world as a step along the road to development. **M.H.**



The promotion of sport has a great potential for development.