Urban football performances: Playing for the neighbourhood in Senegal, 1950s–2000s

Susann Baller

Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute, Volume 84, Number 1, February 2014, pp. 17-35 (Article)

Published by Cambridge University Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/541425
URBAN FOOTBALL PERFORMANCES: PLAYING FOR THE NEIGHBOURHOOD IN SENEGAL, 1950s–2000s

Susann Baller

The Senegalese national football team has not been very successful since its creation in 1961, even though it has played as a finalist at the African Cup of Nations and in the quarter finals at the FIFA World Cup in 2002. The international records of Senegal’s first league clubs have been even worse. While some West African teams are renowned for their international success and very popular in their home cities – Asante Kotoko FC and Accra Hearts of Oak SC in Ghana (Fridy and Brobbey 2009), for example – Senegalese teams have never reached an African Champions League final and very few clubs in the country can fill a stadium at home. Yet football has been one of the most popular sports in Senegal for more than half a century. Today, many Senegalese play in Europe’s top teams. Senegal’s national beach soccer team won the African Beach Soccer Championships twice. But most popular are neighbourhood football clubs, the so-called ‘navétanes’ teams. Thousands of teams exist all over the country and draw enormous numbers of fans. Some well-known Senegalese players, such as El-Hadji Diouf and Papiss Demba Cissé, have started their careers in navétanes teams. Others returned to their original neighbourhood team after a professional football career (Baller 2010: 231–2).

Navétanes teams were first created in the 1950s. At the beginning, they competed against each other in local tournaments that were organized during the rainy season after the end of the league games. In the late 1960s, the teams and their tournaments had become so widespread that the Senegalese Ministry of Youth and Sports decided to create a national organization in order to incorporate them into an official youth programme and organize annual championships. This organization, however, was soon caught up in internal conflicts and eventually was taken over by team members. Teams continued to play on a local and regional level, but the national finals only resumed in the late 1980s. In the early 1990s, the navétanes organization was recognized as an independent

SUSANN BALLER is a lecturer in African history at the University of Basel. She completed her PhD thesis on the history of football, youth politics and the city in Senegal at the Humboldt University of Berlin. She has published widely on sports and urban history in Africa. Recently she co-edited special issues on ‘Sports and the City in Africa’ (The International Journal of the History of Sports, 2011) and ‘Visualizing the Game: Global Perspectives on Sport in Africa’ (Soccer and Society, 2012). Her current project analyses the performance of power by focusing on state visits in West Africa between the 1920s and the 1950s. Email: Susann.Baller@unibas.ch

¹The Wolof word nawetaan (or navétanes) means ‘to spend the rainy season’.

²Over the last fifty years the Senegalese Ministry of Youth and Sports was reshuffled several times, connected to other departments, such as Culture, Education and Environment, and ranked as a state secretaryship or a ministry. To simplify, I will call it only ‘Ministry of Youth and Sports’ in this article.
association by the Ministry of the Interior. In 2008, it became affiliated to Senegal’s football federation.

This article considers why these football teams have become so important in Senegal. While the navétanes teams exist all over the country, my focus is on teams in the city of Dakar and its fast-growing suburban areas in Pikine and Guédiawaye. In order to understand the local dynamics of football in this urban environment, we have to ask how young people position themselves within their local community, the city and the (nation) state – as well as within the global football world. Playing for the neighbourhood means to have fun with friends and neighbours. But it also tells us another story about how young people in the navétanes teams create and renegotiate social relations and take part in the production and transformation of social space. This article argues that in a context where the state fails to provide sufficient infrastructure, education facilities and employment opportunities, the everyday practice of football on and beyond the pitch by players, fans and team organizers can be described as performative acts which serve the formation of and identification with the neighbourhood as a social space. Though winning a football match still is the primary goal for players and fans, the ‘framed performance’ of players on the pitch, of fans on the stands and in the streets, as well as of organizers who coordinate fan activities and supervise the formal ‘staging’ of the football games, can provide a prism through which to explore the changing social meanings of playing football in the neighbourhoods.

This article examines the interrelation between football and the production of social space. It describes football as an urban performance which can be understood as ‘a praxis of everyday social life’ and as a ‘single performance’ – the ‘staged’ match (see introduction to this issue). It is inspired by Henri Lefebvre’s concept of space, which distinguishes between three interconnected dimensions of space, the space which is perceived (‘le perçu’), the conceptualized space (‘le conçu’) and the space which is experienced in everyday practice (‘le vécu’). According to Lefebvre, the experienced space is always more than what we can perceive and/or conceptualize. This is also why one space can always have different meanings, with which it is imbued through spatial experience in everyday life (Lefebvre 2000 [1974]: 42–9). Paul Makeham argues that this ‘practice of everyday life’ can be interpreted as the performance of an ‘urban(e) citizenry’, which ‘performs its collective memory, imagination and aspiration, performing its sense of self both to itself and beyond’ (Makeham 2005: 152). ‘The interaction of the citizenry with public space and infrastructure’, Makeham explains, ‘is a process of self-identification, of performing the self’ (ibid.: 152–3). According to him, ‘urban performativity… enables citizens to invent – through memory, imagination and desire – new ideas about themselves and their relationships with the urban landscape’ (ibid.: 157). Thus they also create different configurations of the ‘experienced space’. Following Lefebvre, however, I argue that public space and infrastructure do not serve only as stages for urban performativity, with which citizens then interact; instead, the performative acts of everyday life produce social space and imbue it with meaning.

Cities are always shaped and remoulded by the varied performances of everyday life – work, leisure, music, dance, fashion, sports or ‘fandom’. This article deals with the ‘perceivable space’ of streets, football pitches and stadiums. This urban space is structured – or conceptualized – into neighbourhoods. For the government, the neighbourhood is an administrative unit, though not a very clear
one. Their contact person is usually the *chef de quartier*. But the limits of a neighbourhood are not exactly demarcated. Until the 1990s, the creation of a neighbourhood often accompanied the recognition of a new party section of the governing Parti Socialiste (Salem 1998: 276–94). People living there created their own spatial experience, however, thus imprinting their neighbourhood’s identity. They employed different practices and strategies, among which the navétanes teams have been particularly influential in producing the neighbourhood as a social space. These teams claim to represent everyone living in a neighbourhood, even though their internal structure is biased in terms of gender and age. According to a survey in the 1990s, about two thirds of the registered members were between 25 and 35 years old, and only 3 per cent were female. But when the period of the navétanes championships approaches, fixed membership becomes less important and many more people, including women, get involved as sponsors, supporters and fans.3

While some have described the fast-growing suburbs of Dakar as urban spaces ‘without real history’ (Salem 1998: 271), examining the history of the navétanes can demonstrate how social actors have created sites of meaning, histories and identification through their social practice in the city. This article follows an actor-centred perspective which is informed by interviews with club members, organizers, players and fans, as well as by personal observation. Based on documents of the Senegalese Ministry of Youth and Sports, it also considers those moments when the state has interfered in the organization of the navétanes, and illustrates the ambivalent relations between young people and the state. The article additionally draws on newspaper cuttings. Senegalese newspapers wrote about the navétanes long before the state got interested in them. They thus provided a further platform on which the navétanes teams negotiated meanings that reflected both their local embeddedness and their interconnectedness with a broader, national sphere.

The article is structured chronologically. It first analyses the navétanes teams in the 1950s and 1960s (the late colonial period and the first years of independence), then in the 1970s and 1980s (a period of gradual democratization) and finally through the period from the 1990s to the present (marked by a multi-party system and a change of political leadership in 2000). It does not, however, recount this history as an institutional history of teams, clubs and the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Instead, each section explores the forms and meanings of ‘performing the neighbourhood’, as players, fans and organizers ‘staged’ the neighbourhood and imbued it with meaning through the everyday practice of football, including such salient moments as the performance of a particular match or the giving of a name to the team.

BRAZIL, OLYMPIC, SANTOS: PLAYING FOOTBALL IN DAKAR IN THE 1950S AND 1960S

How did the navétanes football teams connect with the city in the 1950s and 1960s? We must start with the urban context of the teams and with the major

---

challenges faced by official football clubs at that time. The population of Dakar increased rapidly after the Second World War (Vernière 1977: 18). Many urban newcomers came from the countryside and lived in shanty-town settlements close to the city’s centre. The late colonial government wished to transform Dakar into a ‘modern’ town (Dione 1992). The shanty towns did not fit into this image. Again and again, they were demolished and their populations removed to newly created, low-income settlements. One of these new districts was Pikine, which was set up hastily in the early 1950s on an almost empty field of sand dunes far from the city’s centre. In the following years, tens of thousands of people were removed to Pikine (Vernière 1977: 33; Salem 1998: 93–4). The urban experience of Dakar’s population was largely characterized by the precarious conditions in the shanty towns, where inhabitants never knew when they were to be removed, and the poor infrastructure in the new districts.

Sport played an important role in this context because it allowed urban dwellers to create new social relations and in this way become part of the city. Bernadette Deville-Danthu (1997: 250) writes about the ‘sport fever’ that spread in West Africa in the 1950s. A football representative of the time explained that ‘no doubt, football is king in West Africa’ (Paris-Dakar, 15 October 1952) – a perception shared in many other African cities (Martin 1995: 112–26). The number of officially registered sport clubs and the existing infrastructure did not meet the demand for the game, however. What is more, the Dakar league and its clubs went through a crisis. Refereeing decisions were contested, games were interrupted by angry spectators, and clubs boycotted tournaments (Gaye 1999: 21–3). The crisis intensified in the 1960s. The official championships were suspended several times because of team boycotts. Spectators prevented teams from playing. Officials decided match results. Some players claimed that they felt treated like ‘slaves’ in the league football clubs (Baller 2010: 123; Ndiaye 1989–90: 44–6).

This was the breeding ground for the navétanes teams. These teams were first mentioned in Senegalese newspapers in the mid-1950s, though interviewees indicate that they may have existed before. The teams were put together by an individual ‘patron’ and involved local players and supporters (who contributed toward the team’s fund). They played in small tournaments during the rainy season, which commentators in Senegalese newspapers called inter-quartier or inter-saison championships. The tournaments were organized by private sponsors, and sometimes also by the city’s administration. Each tournament assembled about a dozen teams, who all paid a small participation fee. The winner earned a trophy and was remunerated in coffee, condensed milk or oranges. Even though the prize money was low, the tournaments were very popular and their trophies were keenly contested by players and fans. While the official league did not work well and the city offered a barely stable urban environment, the neighbourhood tournaments drew the masses and became a main focal point for the population.

The activities of players and audiences in the context of the navétanes teams can be read as performances that marked the urban environment and provided it with

---

meaning. Senegalese newspapers recorded how young people played football all over the city, and how crowds of people gathered every Sunday at the few designated football pitches in order to watch the games. The games were no better organized than those of the football league. Newspapers complained about inconsistent refereeing decisions, the interruption of games and violent brawls at various tournaments, and commentators deplored the ‘exaggerated virility’, the ‘overheated atmosphere’, ‘total insecurity’ and ‘unbounded chauvinism’ of the competitions (*Dakar-Matin, 21 August 1964*). Moreover, teams had very limited access to formal football pitches and stadiums. Players and spectators, however, liked the navétanes football and its specific choreographies of strolling in the neighbourhoods, connecting with people, and playing on the open spaces and pitches in the city. According to some observers, players even preferred the navétanes teams because of their ‘family character’ and the vibrant atmosphere of the games (*Dakar-Matin, 11 November 1963*).5

The names of the teams reflect how participants imagined navétanes football as something connected to a global football culture, but also rooted in their neighbourhoods. One should remember what the city of Dakar was like in the 1950s and 1960s – the crowded neighbourhoods close to the city’s centre, the badly equipped settlements in the distant suburban areas, the poor infrastructure, and the insufficient leisure facilities. But reading the newspaper cuttings one is transported to another scene. Newspapers wrote about the ‘Monegasque players’ who dominated a navétanes match in Dakar (*Dakar-Matin, 17 August 1962*), about ‘Santos F.C.’ (the team of the legendary Brazilian, Pele) which had ‘won easily’ in a match against ‘Real Madrid’ (26 September 1963), while ‘Juventus de Thiaroye’ had just secured the Cup (18 August 1967). The team names represented a mix of top European, South American (and a few African) football club names; other names reflected some social, cultural and/or political programme; and names like Thiaroye, a district in the suburbs of Pikine, drew attention and loyalty back to the neighbourhood. Combining the different spheres and symbols to which they referred, they also demonstrate how those identifying with the teams imagined their neighbourhoods as a social space, which they defined as local and global at the same time.

Teams were called ‘Monaco de Pikine’, ‘Olympic de Champs de Course’ (a squatter settlement in Dakar), ‘Milan A.C.’, ‘F.C. Barcelone de Pikine’, ‘Benfica’, ‘Arsenale’, ‘Blackpool de Rebeuss’ (Blackpool – a top English team in the 1950s Rebeuss, a neighbourhood in Dakar) and ‘River Plate’ (one of the top Argentinian clubs in the 1950s). Some teams referred to the best national squads of the time, such as ‘Brésil de Wakhinane’ (in one of the shanty-towns in Dakar) and ‘Hungary’. According to the sociologist Alioune Mbaye, who later worked at the Ministry of Sports in Senegal, these names expressed a process of ‘cultural assimilation’ and ‘acculturation’ of young people who had broken with ‘African cultural models’ (*Mbaye 1998: 143*), a point of view which the Ministry of Youth and Sports also put forward in the late 1960s. One can argue, however, that young people in the teams, by selecting these names, were doing something different – in a symbolic way, they were bringing ‘the world’ into their

---

5 Former navétanes football players underlined this, among them former coach of ASC Walli Daan and Magg Daan, interview on 21 March 2001 in Djidda Thiaroye Kao, Pikine.
neighbourhood. They referred to a global football world, but also to their locality – Rebeuss, Wakhinane, Thiaroye or Pikine, wards and districts explicitly named in the teams.

Not all team names were ‘global’ – some instead reflected social or political ambitions. A few teams took over the names of renowned African teams, perhaps with a degree of Pan-African intention: ‘Africa Sports de Pikine’ referred to a team from Abidjan; and ‘Oryx de Thiaroye-sur-Mer’ was named after Oryx de Douala, who had won the African Cup of Champions Clubs in 1964. Some clubs made an even more obviously political statement, such as ‘Renaissance Africaine’, ‘Harlem de Médina’, ‘Ghetto’, ‘Corée du Nord’, ‘Corée du Sud’, or ‘Pékin Football Club’, which can be understood within a broader Senegalese youth culture, where many young people were interested in the Afro-American Civil Rights Movement, in Pan-Africanism and in communist ideas. Other teams made their name a social programme, like ‘Espoir’ and ‘Progrès’. A few chose Wolof names in the 1950s and 1960s, often referring to local history and culture, such as ‘Damel’ (ruler of the pre-colonial Wolof kingdom of Cayor) and ‘Bismillahi’ (a team of Tijānī disciples), or invoking styles of play or team spirit – ‘Khandalou’ (‘to stroll’), ‘Mélakh’ (‘lightning’) and ‘Wali Dane’ (‘coming together and winning’).

After independence in 1960, the Senegalese politics of youth and sports embraced the project of building the nation and ‘new’ Senegalese citizens who would be physically and mentally strong, responsible and ready to serve their country. Young people were expected to play a major role in this project. Sport was considered as furthering this goal. The Ministry of Youth and Sports, however, did not appreciate the navétanes teams and tournaments. It did not control this movement, which was popular among young people but not incorporated into any national sports policy. Moreover, the Ministry complained about the increasing ‘anarchy’ of the games, the ‘incompetence’ of the organizers and the ‘improvidence’ of players. And, finally, it did not like the ‘imported’ names.

Yet, the state did not have much to offer to urban youth (almost no leisure facilities, badly equipped neighbourhoods, limited professional career opportunities), beyond its ambition of controlling young people in Senegal. This pushed young people in the cities to withdraw further from the embrace of the state, focusing instead on the neighbourhoods, which they formed as their own social space. The navétanes teams provided a platform for leisure activities beyond state-controlled youth programmes. They were built as an alternative project to the national project of youth and sports, though not the only one (on Senegalese youth culture in the 1960s see also Baller2010:8 9 – 112). Football in and between the neighbourhoods offered young people an opportunity to have an impact on urban space and imbue it with meaning (see also Baller 2007). The wards of

---


Dakar and its suburban areas did not provide many possibilities for identifying with the place where people lived. But the navétanes football teams filled the gap. In a context of rapid urbanization and (often forced) removals, they allowed people to connect with their neighbourhood, to experience it, and to perform it as a social space.

Partly, young people did this in a very concrete way by selecting local players from the neighbourhood, playing on the streets, and using all available open spaces for their own ends. Thus, young people took possession of urban space and turned it into their own end. Partly, the navétanes teams provided a platform for reimaging the neighbourhood in a new way – best represented in the names of the teams and the memories and expectations surrounding the games. While the perceivable shape of the neighbourhoods was characterized by poor infrastructure and housing (which at this time still included many wooden barracks), the imagined world of the tournaments was one of glory and fame – in stories told by and about former members of navétanes teams, but also as reported in Senegalese newspapers. The press coverage indicates that already at this time the navétanes were more than simply a neighbourhood affair. Performing social space – as the everyday praxis of football and as the ‘staged’ match – thus served the production of a ‘glocal’ place, embedded in the neighbourhoods through social acts and relations, and connected to worlds elsewhere through symbols and imagination.

CONTROL AND CONTEST: THE NAVÉTANES TEAMS, 1970S TO 1980S

In the late 1960s, the Senegalese Ministry of Youth and Sports responded to the increasing number of navétanes teams and tournaments – and to the simultaneous crisis of the football league. At first, it tried to enforce a clear-cut distinction between navétanes and league football. But this accelerated the rise of navétanes teams, because many players lost their membership in league teams. In 1970, the Ministry of Youth and Sports created a national body, ONCAV (Organisme national de coordination des activités des vacances). All navétanes teams were asked to enrol with this organization. Its main purpose was to carry out annual national championships, championnat national populaire or short ‘national pop’ competitions between navétanes teams. ONCAV had a pyramid structure, with the teams at the bottom, the local and regional coordinating committees in the middle, and the national office at the top. The coordinating committees were filled with team delegates, but the Ministry had its representatives in the leading bodies.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports aimed at exerting greater control over young people, in particular after the student uprisings in Dakar in 1968 (Bathily 1992), which had led many young people from schools and universities to embrace activities in neighbourhood clubs. The Ministry hoped to make these young people what it considered to be ‘useful citizens’, and to transform the clubs into

---

8In 1970, this body was called OCC (Organisme central de coordination), renamed as ONCAV a year later. The national finals started in 1971.
leaders of local development – ‘cellules d’animation du quartier’. But young people themselves were already inclined to serve their neighbourhoods. They were aware of the social challenges in the city. They experienced at first hand how the neighbourhoods became more and more densely populated, how many urban dwellers had only limited access to school, healthcare and work, and how public services such as garbage collection and street cleaning were inadequately performed. However, they did not want to be incorporated in the policy of the state and its administrative initiatives. ‘We were very critical,’ a former navétanes activist stressed, ‘you could say we were communists.’

A highly ambivalent relationship between the clubs and the state ensued. The Ministry of Youth and Sports interfered in the affairs of teams and tournaments, but had only limited impact. Already by the mid-1970s, the ‘national pop finals were interrupted following team boycotts and conflicts between regional bodies. The concept of regular championships, however, was successful. In the first year, almost a hundred teams enrolled in the region of Dakar. According to the Ministry of Youth and Sports, several thousand spectators attended each match. Teams were eager to participate. The tournaments became a favourite platform on which to play for the neighbourhood and to celebrate it. This helped the national office to gain some influence. In 1973, ONCAV requested that teams should merge, arguing that the number of football pitches was insufficient (Niang 1994–5: 35–6). But the fusion of teams also provoked incomprehension among the navétanes amateurs. Abdoulaye Niang notices that very few teams actually merged in Dakar and Pikine, while about the same number of teams emerged through splits in other existing teams. ‘Each neighbourhood wants its own club,’ Niang underlines (ibid.: 37): the logic of football infrastructure was less significant, for the clubs, than social dynamics within the neighbourhoods that made it necessary to have ‘one’s own’ team.

The internal structure and character of the teams changed in the 1970s. A football team became an ‘ASC’ (Association sportive et culturelle). It is debatable who initiated this change. Documents from the Ministry of Youth and Sports had repeatedly stressed that young people should get more involved in local development. In 1970, they also proposed the creation of the ‘ASCC’ (Association sportive, culturelle et cooperative) and the ‘ASCA’ (Association sportive, culturelle et artisanale). According to several authors, ONCAV asked navétanes teams to restructure as ASCs and to choose new (Wolof) names (Ndiaye 1982: 26; Niang 1994–5: 35). Former members of the teams, however, explained in interviews that the ‘ASC’ idea was theirs. Some newspaper cuttings support this argument (Le Soleil, 19 September 1972 and 22 November 1973). Interviewees pointed out that high school and university students had entered the navétanes clubs in

---

10Founding member of ASC Dissoo, youth officer, interview on 1 April 2001 in Wakhinane Nimzatt, Guédiawaye.
opposition to the state and started to build up associations that would not just play football and other sports but also set up social and cultural projects such as theatre groups, small libraries, round table discussions or excursions with schoolchildren. Some teams organized women’s football tournaments as well as track meetings, basketball and handball (see for further details Baller 2010). Performing the neighbourhood in the context of navétanes activities still meant to play football, to watch the games and to cheer one’s team, but it also meant improving social conditions and reimagining the neighbourhood.

Teams were now called ASC ‘Moom Sa Reew’ (Wolof: ‘own your country’, also used for independence), ‘Diamono’ (epoch, time), ‘Cosaan’ (origin, history), or ‘Njelben’ (origin, the beginning of an action), in order to refer to an historical past and the discovery of one’s origins. Others took names such as ‘Diambar’ (brave, warrior), ‘Guélwaar’ (a Serer noble person), or ‘Cayor’ (Wolof kingdom from the mid-sixteenth to the nineteenth century) which expressed local values and invoked pre-colonial history. Many chose a name that stressed the ambitions, success and solidarity of the club, such as ‘Diouboo’ (to be united), ‘Deggo’ (mutual consent), ‘Bokk Diom’ (mutual self-respect), ‘Mag Daan’ (to grow up and to win), ‘Diakarlo’ (to confront), ‘Rakadiou’ (to be euphoric), ‘Boul Faale’ (‘do not worry’) and ‘Bidew’ (star). Some took the name of an animal, such as ‘Niayes-Thioker’ (bush-francolin), or of a country-specific tree, such as ‘Gouye gi’ (baobab). Members stressed that the choice of these names was embedded in a claim for national authenticity as Senegalese left-wing parties propagated it in the early 1970s, but directed against Léopold Sédar Senghor’s rather elitist concept of négritude.13

Following the narratives of interviewees and reading the press coverage, one can describe the period of the 1970s and 1980s as the ‘glorious years’ of the navétanes, though teams faced a number of challenges. In particular, the poor quality of football pitches was an ongoing problem. Teams and tournaments did not have enough pitches at their disposal, and those they used were often poorly equipped. A newspaper wrote, about a stadium in Dakar, that the pitch was not demarcated, that animals strolled around, and that the goalposts were not well constructed (Le Soleil, 31 August 1970). A report about the stadium in Pikine explained that this was really a fenced space where players had to be ‘courageous to play and to fall down’ (Dakar-Matin, 17 October 1969). But a few new stadiums were erected, as in Guédiawaye in 1977 (Le Soleil, 10 Mai 1977). And, despite these obstacles, the navétanes teams and championships attracted enormous attention. The newspapers regularly dedicated between two and four pages to the navétanes (or ‘national pop’) teams. Commentators even argued that the best football in the Dakar region was played not in the big stadiums, but in the streets (Le Soleil, 15 July 1976).

Newspaper cuttings portray the atmosphere of the tournaments colourfully, underlining their performance character. They write about the courageous deeds of the teams and the moral support from the stands, about the vocal exuberance of fans who cheered their teams with popular songs and the rhythms of

13Founding member of ASC Dissoo, youth officer, interview on 1 April 2001 in Wakhinane Nimzatt, Guédiawaye.
percussion. Often they recall the ‘South American atmosphere’ at the games, their ‘carnival-like’ character, the *tam-tam*, *tamas* and *sabar* drums, the trumpets and whistles, and the young women who were beautifully dressed and who chanted and cheered on their team with ‘overheated’ flamboyance. Some teams even brought their own orchestras to provide the musical ambience. ‘The “pop” is at the peak of its infernal rhythm. The matches outdo each other in relentless, raucous excess’ (*Le Soleil*, 23 September 1980). ‘Whistles, tam-tams, banners with the slogans “Allez Bendya”, “Allez Gounye Zine”, a mass of young girls chanting the name of their team… stands crowded to overflowing: this was the atmosphere at the final… which we attended yesterday in… Guédiawaye’ (*Le Soleil*, 7 September 1979).

Playing for the neighbourhood still meant being captivated by a project posing an alternative to that of the state. The state’s way of engaging neighbourhoods was about political considerations and clientele networks. The *navétanes* teams (or ASCs) allowed for an emotional relation with neighbourhoods, a platform for identification with the city – and this at a time when many districts had been erected recently, or were beset by increasing numbers of newcomers. Many interviewees emphasized that *navétanes* teams were for everyone – and everyone, established or newly arrived, was behind the team. The teams were expected to reflect the identification between ‘*le quartier et le club*’ (*Le Soleil*, 25 February 1982). Their main funds and resources were contributed by the people living in the neighbourhood. Fans (often young women) went from house to house to collect money, even if these were small amounts. Others (often young men) tried to set aside some of their earnings for their team. Clubs also organized dance parties for which they sold tickets. Club leaders were ready to ‘sacrifice everything’ for the success of their team (Ndiaye 1982: 27–8). Supporters were motivated simply by ‘affection for the neighbourhood’, a former club member remembered.14 The ideal was to select local players – *les gosses du quartier* (neighbourhood kids) – who would give everything to make the team victorious. Club officials characterized their clubs as a ‘family’ and as ‘a close-knit group of people’, and stressed that ‘these youths are all born here’ (*Le Soleil*, 27 October 1977).

Yet, the organization of the *navétanes* teams in country-wide championships also provoked tensions and conflicts – both between the teams (or neighbourhoods) and between different districts, cities and regions. On a local level, there was a lot at stake, for teams and fans – their honour, their fame, and a good deal of money which they had put into their team. Again and again, fans and/or players reacted violently if the course of a match turned against their expectations. This could turn into fierce fights, or even into rage turned against the stadium’s facilities (*Le Soleil*, 23 September 1980). On a regional and national level, the members of the coordinating committees contested rules, statutes and refereeing decisions, but also the distribution of funds, the influence of different regional committees within the national body, and the relationship between ONCAV and the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Conflicts between young people and the state

---

14 Former member of ASC Magg Daan, interview on 25 January 2001 in Djidda Thiaroye Kao, Pikine.
became more marked. In 1977, members of the navétanes teams claimed the presidency of ONCAV for the first time (Ndiaye 1982–4: 13). In the 1980s, they took over all the coordinating committees of the navétanes national body. Young people were thus able to express their urban citizenship, but at the same time tensions emerged between the coordinating office in Dakar and its counterparts in the other districts and regions, who aimed for more influence in ONCAV decisions (see also Baller 2010: 272–4).

Observers described Dakar in the early 1980s as ‘a city full of paradoxes, attractive without a doubt, and yet, at the same time, distressing’ (Bugnicourt 1983: 27) – a city with increasing unemployment rates, a growing number of young people, and a lack of educational facilities. Jacques Bugnicourt suggests that ‘Dakar tends to serve as a display-city’, ‘agreeable to foreign advisers and the privileged foreign class’ (ibid.: 41). But behind this surface, he argues, there were many other ‘Dakars’, many other ‘readings’ and ‘experiences’ of the city. The navétanes teams – and ASCs – served as one platform on which young people were able to negotiate the paradoxes of the city, to experience it, to imagine it in their own ways, and to reshape it through their social and cultural practices. Beyond the ‘display-city’ of Dakar’s centre, many neighbourhoods of the extended city were characterized by simple and almost monotonous housing. In the mid-1980s, 20 per cent of the buildings in Pikine were wooden barracks or under construction; almost 70 per cent were single-storey buildings (Salem 1998: 130). Yet several visitors were impressed by the atmosphere in streets that ‘overflow with activity’ (Giancarlo 1983: 74). ‘Pikine, the dormitory town has awoken,’ a journalist noticed, and this was also because of the creative activities of numerous neighbourhood clubs (Le Soleil, 25–26 November 1972).

If we compare how the navétanes teams and tournaments were ‘staged’ in the 1950s and 1960s with the later period we have been considering, we can recognize that the neighbourhood was still vital, but was produced as a social space in different ways. In the earlier period, the neighbourhoods had been a space of withdrawal from state influence, even though newspaper coverage already made many teams visible far beyond their home-base locality. In the 1970s, the navétanes were marked by the intervention of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Although it was not able to control the teams, the creation of ONCAV and its committees changed the character of the tournaments. Its pyramid structure and the annual championships intensified competition and strengthened local identification with neighbourhood, district or city. Moreover, the new structure opened up more formal sites for staging the performances of teams and fans – in particular, football stadiums (even if not all national stadiums were made available to navétanes teams, and many of those to which they had access were poorly equipped). In addition, the neighbourhood was differently conceived. On the one hand, ONCAV had to recognize the creation of new teams and thus to acknowledge the existence – or, from a statutory perspective, the inexistence – of a neighbourhood. This created a more formalized meaning of the neighbourhood. On the other hand, teams became more structured and inclusive with the creation of ASCs. They encouraged other activities than (male) football, which allowed more people of different ages and gender to get involved in the clubs’ activities. The neighbourhood thus started to play a crucial role beyond the football pitch in theatre, social and cultural activities, and other sport competitions.
In January 2011, I attended the final of the Dakar ‘Zone 2’ tournament between ASC Pinthie and ASC Fann, which Pinthie won after a prolonged penalty shoot-out. The event was intriguing in several ways. Well before the match itself, club members and fans had been involved in a number of preparatory activities. Banners and garlands of plastic bottles in the colours of the club were put up in the streets. Fans coloured trees, walls and sidewalks, embellishing streets and walls with paintings of cup trophies, balls and local football stars. Often, the front door of a player’s home was decorated with his portrait. At some corners, club members mounted shrines, attached a talisman on a tree, or sprinkled magic water on the street. On match day, inhabitants of the two neighbourhoods – from young boys to elderly ladies – dressed in the colours of their team. Fans wore elaborate costumes, and tailors were busy finalizing robes and banners. From time to time, fans banded together, running through the streets, cheering and chanting their team’s name. No one would have dared to make a flying visit to the streets of the rival club, though many had friends on both sides, and some players even lived in the ward of their opponents.

The match started in the late afternoon. Demba Diop stadium was crammed full, its 15,000 seats all occupied, the atmosphere tense. Rumours had spread that fans from Pinthie would devastate the neighbourhood of ASC Fann if their team should lose. The match had been rescheduled several times over security considerations. Other rumours affirmed that Pinthie would employ the strong magical means conveyed by a successful Senegalese wrestling star. Entering the stadium grounds, fans of Pinthie brandished a dead chicken and threw lighted matches around. In the interior of the stadium, the players of Fann obviously were following instructions issued to counter the power of Pinthie’s magic. Players did not enter through the main door but jumped over the fence around the pitch. When finally they ventured on to it, they splattered water around. In the navétanes registration rules, all these acts are considered as proof of the use of magical forces, and should cause the game to be forfeited (Baller 2010: 280–6). Immediately after the kick-off, and again on the resumption after half-time, the ASC Fann players kicked the ball beyond the touchline and all lay down on the pitch for a second before they continued to play. In other respects, the match conformed closely to the choreography of any match organized under the wide patronage of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). Indeed, a FIFA fairplay banner was unfurled before the kick-off. The equipment of the players was professional. After the final whistle, the cup trophy and gifts were handed over. One of the leading members of the Abdoulaye Wade government, acting as patron of the regional navétanes championships in Dakar, had offered CFA500,000 (€750) to the finalists – as well as balls, shirts and other football equipment (Le POPulaire, 28 January 2011).

This example reflects several characteristics of more recent developments in the navétanes teams and tournaments, such as the role of money, the impact of politicians, the use of magic forces at a match, and the fear that violence may break out during or after the game. Moreover, it is a strong expression of how a neighbourhood is ‘performed’ in a very concrete sense. Almost everything around
this match was a ‘staged’ performance – the official ceremonies, the playing according to the FIFA rules, but also the display of the magical forces employed, the colourfully dressed fans, their chants, their cheering and *tam-tam*, and their decoration of the neighbourhood’s streets. The garlands of plastic bottles, the banners, and the paintings of *navétanes* clubs are a common sight in Dakar streets today. Some neighbourhoods are very poorly constructed and serviced. I remember well a visit in the neighbourhood of ASC Netti Mbaar (see also Werner 1993 on this neighbourhood). It is part of an informally erected settlement in Pikine. For more than a decade, a large part of Nietti Mbaar had been inundated every rainy season. More recently, the district had installed an immense water reservoir, for which many inhabitants had to be removed. Yet, arriving in the neighbourhood, walking through the deep sand of the streets, one of the first signs to greet one is a huge mural of the *navétanes* trophy won by the team at the local Zone 3 final in Guédiawaye a few years ago. In a district with almost no specific landmark, such a painting can serve to mark one’s identification with a neighbourhood. It reminds the inhabitants of their success and signals to passers-by that they are entering a social space imbued with meaning by the local ASC.

One can connect these practices to the *set setal* movement in Dakar. In 1990, young people embellished streets with murals, hand-made steles, and clean-up activities (Diouf 1992). According to Mamadou Diouf (1996: 226), ‘their practices expressed a will to break with the historic memory that accompanied the nationalist generation’s rise to power’. Moreover, it expressed ‘tactics of identity, which recreate categories of a new sociability’ by inscribing the signs of the young in the sand, streets and walls of the city (Diouf 2005). Diouf emphasizes that the *set setal* was ‘centred in and on the neighborhood, the “nook” (*le coin*) of the Wolof urbanites’, and that it was ‘a direct response to the rapid degradation of public infrastructure’ (*ibid*.). Most of the young people engaged in the *set setal* were involved in the ASC. Up to today, clubs call the cleaning-up and embellishment of Dakar streets a *set setal* (in Wolof, ‘clean – to clean up’). Commentators in a Senegalese weekly explained that, through the *set setal*, the neighbourhood displaced the authority of the urban commune: ‘All decisions are taken [in the neighbourhood],... Young people have taken the initiative and dictate their rules. The street is controlled by those who live there’ (*Sud Hebdo*, 29 November 1990).

In the mid-1980s about 50,000 members were registered with ONCAV in 600 clubs all over the country, more than 200 of them in Dakar (*Le Soleil*, 11–12 August 1984). In the late 1990s, Dakar alone had about 50,000 registered members.15 Numerically, ONCAV had grown swiftly and steadily in importance, and this made it significant politically, too. The period following the 1988 Senegalese presidential elections was tense, with a year of strikes at the University of Dakar and electoral riots (Diouf 1996). After the presidential elections of 1993, which again were hotly contested, Jérôme Gérard (1993: 115) noticed that Senegalese youth had become and would remain a ‘true tinderbox’ if the political situation in the country did not change. In this context, the state was inclined to

---

find a way to cooperate with – and so co-opt – young people; it considered youth clubs to be an appropriate tool. During the 1980s, club members had renegotiated the organization of the ONCAV committees, which were now fully under the control of ASC members. Some called what followed an ‘offensive de charme des politiciens’ (Sud Hebdo, 14 September 1989). Already in 1989, President Abdou Diouf had asked district officials to support the navétanes wherever possible (Le Soleil, 2 August 1989). In 1992, ONCAV was recognized as an independent association and, four years later, it was awarded the status of being in the ‘public interest’. Many observers had criticized the championships because of an increasing number of violent incidents around the games. The Youth and Sports Minister, however, made it clear that he would not like to be the one who would have to impose sanctions on the games (Sud Quotidien, 29 October 1996). In the late 1990s, the government started a ‘Projet ASC-Emploi’ with a budget of one billion CFA francs for small-scale enterprises affiliated with the ASC (Sud Sport, 28 September 1998).

Once the popular preoccupation ‘of a few fellows’, as a report noticed in the late 1980s, the navétanes had become a ‘business of big money’ (Sud Hebdo, 14 September 1989). This process fostered a professionalization and politicization of the clubs and committees. Moreover, it influenced the relation between the ASCs and the way social space was produced and imbued with meaning. In the neighbourhoods, fans still collected money from door to door, organized benefit dance parties, embellished the streets, and cheered on the players of their team. Yet, the ‘local’ became more and more intertwined with the ‘national’ and even the ‘global’. The neighbourhood and its clubs ceased to be a place of social and political withdrawal from the state, but rather became a stomping ground for politicians, while those club members who served on the ONCAV committees often sought the company of the political establishment – a tense process, as many club members also continued to remind their ‘fellows’ that they should do something for the neighbourhoods, that the teams should be kept out of politics, that local players should be supported, and that money should be used for grassroots social and economic development. In fact, some ASCs had become key players in their neighbourhoods, collaborating with NGOs and developing social projects. For them, anyone who wanted to realize something in the neighbourhoods, whether private institutions or the public administration, had to negotiate with the ASC. But even these ASCs had to deal with a ‘football faction’, which would always argue that the team would have to win first.

The professionalization of navétanes football started in the 1980s, but became evident in the 1990s. In the first place this concerned the formalization of rules governing the conduct of matches but also how a match is ‘staged’, including the opening and closing ceremonies. A whole bureaucratic procedure was established in order to keep tabs on players and games, and to safeguard discipline and fair play. Even the magical dimension of a match was incorporated into this bureaucratic apparatus as rules were developed to interdict specific actions considered as serving magical means (Baller 2010: 280–6). Second, the teams professionalized their equipment, often with the aid of club members who lived

---

16 Examples for this development are, for instance, ASC Walli Dann and ASC Jamono II in Guédiawaye.
in the diaspora in Europe or North America. Players began to turn out for a navétanes team in order to get top-quality football boots and other equipment. In the 1960s and 1970s, teams used simple t-shirts with a painted number on the back. In the 1980s, teams started to order professional shirts produced exclusively for them. Third, players increasingly aimed for a professional football career, encouraged also by the success of the national team in 2002 and the growing presence of Senegalese players in Europe.

In the 1970s, the ONCAV statutes had specified that players could only play in teams from the district where they lived (Ndiaye 1982: 22). This requirement was later abandoned. Current teams frequently use ‘mercenaries’ – players who live in another ward or district of the city, or even another region of the country, and who get paid for playing for a team. When ASC Nietti Mbaar in Pikine won the district finals in 2000, most of its players were ‘mercenaries’. This practice is often considered as undermining the local character of navétanes football. Back in the mid-1990s, ASC Nietti Mbaar had still adopted the slogan ‘only the person, who disregards his neighbourhood, will leave it’. In the early 2000s, however, members argued that it was thanks to the players from outside that they had won. What is more, they explained, the players from elsewhere had now become ‘Nietti Mbarois’. According to them, it was evident that a football player would select a team which he considered best for his career: ‘We talk about… globalization, everything is open. . . . We have seen Senegalese players who have left… [for] France, Germany and Italy. . . . Even on the lower level of the navétanes, players change the club.’ Interestingly, interviewees stressed both the value of including local players and the persuasive economics of football on a global scale.

The politicization of the navétanes movement has become more ambivalent. The ASCs are expected to be apolitical in Senegalese law, and club members usually do not want to get drawn into politics. Désiré Manirakiza (2010) describes the considerable role played by ethnic and political networks in amateur football in Cameroonian cities. The navétanes, however, are different. Diouf (1996: 236) even argues that the ASCs tend to ‘escape the clientelist logics’ of the state. But they do not always succeed in this endeavour. There is too much at stake, and there are too many interests involved. A Senegalese newspaper once noticed that a social movement that draws millions of young people all over the country could not leave ‘the political appetites’ indifferent (Sud Hebdo, 14 September 1989). At the club level, politicians sometimes helped to raise additional financial support. Some club members also used their activities in the ASC in order to gain experience in local politics. Some then continued with a political career. ‘ONCAV as a structure and the clubs . . . are not doing politics,’ a club member argued, ‘but the persons in the committees do politics.’ After the presidential elections in 2000, the ONCAV body almost collapsed, because members of the national office were still close to the former government, whereas the new political leadership wanted to increase its influence (Baller 2010: 157–65). When in 2009, however, a Member of Parliament suggested he stop the ‘tyranny of the navétanes’, the Prime

---

17 Member of ASC Nietti Mbaar, interview on 11 March 2001 in Djidda Thiaroye Kao, Pikine.
18 Ibid.
19 Founding member of ASC Dissoo, youth officer, interview on 1 April 2001 in Wakhinane Nimzatt, Guédiawaye.
Minister objected that ‘no government can ever suppress the navétanes’ (L’AS, 24 July 2009). ONCAV prevailed and was integrated into a newly constituted Senegalese football federation – thus becoming affiliated with FIFA.

CONCLUSION

According to Gérard Salem (1998: 272), the sense of being connected to a territorial identity of the city hardly existed in Pikine. Researching into the navétanes teams and their tournaments, however, can provide a different perspective. According to Diouf (2002: 263), the ASC can serve as an example of the ‘territorial inscription’ into the city of young people, who redefine their spatial and institutional surroundings in a process that creates a ‘new sociability’ different to those of the ‘ethnic group’ and the ‘nation’. Cities are a ‘dynamically evolving manifestation of social interaction’, in which sports can ‘structure social relations in the city and can be used to create urban sociability’ (Baller and Cornelissen 2011: 2086). Christian Koller (2008: 23–4) raises the question of how cities ‘stage’ themselves in (big) sport events, and in which urban places. Considering the history of the navétanes football teams and championships, we can get an idea of how this has worked out in the context of Dakar and its suburbs. It is not the city which is ‘performing’ itself in sport events, but (young) people who ‘perform’ the city, and more precisely their neighbourhoods. With their teams and tournaments they produce urbanity as a multilayered social space that embraces both the local and also worlds elsewhere. Cities can be described as ‘theatres of social action’, as Lewis Mumford states (Mumford 2011 [1937]). The ‘staged’ performances of a football match are one platform within these urban theatres. But these ‘urban theatres’ are themselves part of an everyday life practice. As this article shows, the performances of a football match are not staged in an ‘as if’ mode of action, as the theatre metaphor sometimes suggests, but actively contribute to the production of the neighbourhood as a social space.

Playing football for the neighbourhood has a very local connotation. Yet reflecting on the history of the navétanes teams also demonstrates how much the neighbourhood has been interconnected with other levels, such as the ‘city’, the ‘nation’ and ‘the world’. Whereas teams still play because they want to win, the choreographies of football and fandom in the neighbourhoods have changed. In the 1950s and 1960s, the navétanes were organized as an alternative project to the control of the state and to league and national teams. They played with mainly local players, but imagined the world within their neighbourhood by taking over names from European and South American top teams. In 1970, a national organization of the navétanes was introduced by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, but conflicts started between different regional bodies. The navétanes continued to be mainly a local endeavour, though intersecting with regional and national interests. At the same time, young people from schools and universities entered the clubs, which were reorganized around broader social and cultural activities. Clubs also changed names. Moreover, they restructured the national navétanes committees, bringing them under the leadership of club members. In this process, the navétanes teams and tournaments became increasingly professionalized – but also more politicized.
Today, many teams hire players from other neighbourhoods and cities, and players hope to be scouted and recruited by world-class teams. The navétanes championships have become a national endeavour, and championship representatives are pleased that ONCAV has been affiliated with the Senegalese football federation, and thus with FIFA, which also reflects how much it has become part of a global football economy. It will be interesting to see if and how the more recent government in Senegal under President Macky Sall will try to use and/or intervene in the navétanes. It is unlikely, however, that any government will be able to suppress them. The most important games are still those performed at a local level, in playing for the neighbourhood. It is the neighbourhood that draws the fans, maybe because there is more at stake than to win a football match. The neighbourhood is produced and reimagined locally – in the performative acts of everyday life practices in the streets and on the football pitches – and, at the same time, it is connected to a global world. Reflecting on the history of the navétanes teams and tournaments, we can talk about the different configurations of a ‘localized globalization’ (Biaya 2000: 25) that is invented, performed and staged in the neighbourhoods, and evolves over time.

REFERENCES


**ABSTRACT**

In Senegal, neighbourhood football teams are more popular than teams in the national football league. The so-called navétanes teams were first created in the 1950s. Since the early 1970s, they have competed in local, regional and national neighbourhood championships. This article considers the history of these clubs and their championships by focusing on the city of Dakar and its fast-growing
suburbs, Pikine and Guédiawaye. Research on the navétanes allows an exploration of the social and cultural history of the neighbourhoods from the actor-centred perspective of urban youth. The history of the navétanes reflects the complex interrelations between young people, the city and the state. The performative act of football—on and beyond the pitch, by players, fans and organizers—constitutes the neighbourhood as a social space in a context where the state fails to provide sufficient infrastructure and is often contested. The navétanes clubs and championships demonstrate how young people have experienced and imagined their neighbourhoods in different local-level ways, while at the same time interconnecting them with other social spaces, such as the ‘city’, the ‘nation’ and ‘the world’.

RÉSUMÉ