

***Jamais une grève de football (never a soccer strike):*
A Reflection on Soccer at a Senegalese University**

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Abstract

This reflective piece considers the symbolic place of soccer within the institutional framework of *l'Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis* in Senegal. Considering sport as an arena for discourse, I explore notions of identity and national imagination as they are played out on the soccer fields of this university. In particular, I suggest that soccer serves an alternative venue for productive discussion when the university, in its official capacity, fails to provide such space.

The university is a space for the intellectual elite of Senegal in particular and West Africa in general to participate in the constant negotiation of power, influence, and change. Explicit and implicit dialogues between students, faculty, and both formal and informal student assemblies imagine the possibilities for this majority Muslim and Francophone nation.¹ Such dialogue inevitably leads to protest, as any functional democracy experiences. In the Senegalese university context, this protest takes the form of *grèves*, or strikes. This essay explores the place of soccer within the institutional character of *l'Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis* (UGB). By considering the manner in which this institution provides a space for the perpetual exploration and creation of the nation, I juxtapose this discourse with the collaborative manifestation of nationhood on the soccer field.

L'Université Gaston Berger is the second public university in Senegal and opened its doors in 1990 after many years of planning. It was established to house the social science departments from *l'Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar* (UCAD), which continues to serve as the nation's hub for the exact sciences. Compared to UCAD, UGB is significantly smaller in size with an estimated 3,500 students. The university is commissioned to engage in a national teaching and research program, a project that aims to train cadres who are capable of fitting into the various sectors of activity in the country.² Its geographical location both outside of Senegal's capital, and even isolated from the city of Saint-Louis by approximately twelve kilometers, renders its role in national activity less apparent. However, this isolation does not detract from its role as a place for Senegalese and Francophone West Africa's intellectual elite to contribute to the nation's knowledge base, policies, and democratic reputation.

Many of UGB's professors also serve on national committees or within various ministries, including the Ministry of Education for Senegal.

As centers for discourse on national development inextricably linked to the state, both public universities in Senegal are characterized by frequent strikes by student, faculty, and staff unions each year. When students strike in efforts to acquire their promised government stipends and to improve living and learning conditions on campus, one of the entities targeted is *Le Centre Régional des Oeuvres Universitaires de Saint-Louis* (CROUS). CROUS is the administrative body responsible for ensuring adequate resources for recreation activity on campus. Yet, because soccer is such a crucial venue for both recreation and communal bonding, even when classes have been postponed and the academic campus is vacant due to such protest, students can be found on the various sandy soccer fields spotting the campus of this Sahelien university.

In a university community representative of the ethnic and religious diversity of Senegal, one finds numerous groupings. This diversity plays out on the soccer field in modes of opposition simultaneously separating and bringing individuals and communities together. One also notes that as with the composition of the nation, categories are fluid and members of one group can be found within and outside of any other given category. When a Senegalese individual can identify him/herself in categories as varied as ethnic group, linguistic heritage, religion, Sufi brotherhood, geographical origin, academic discipline, and even university village (sets of dormitories), one recognizes the complexity of allegiance and identity found in the campus community.

In keeping with this multitude of identities, soccer matches on campus are organized in equally varied

combinations. There are matches between students from different home regions, between university villages, and between colleges within the university, thus indicating the fluidity of identity and the ability to imagine this population in manifold ways. This creative discourse through sport serves as a symbolic and often more productive arena for collective dialogue at UGB. Sport is an alternative way to conceive of all relationships. While it can certainly be divisive and exploited by the powers that be, sport is also a forum for cohesion, collective expression, realigning, and, ultimately, renegotiating national identity.

In regard to the conflict between the Senegal's southern Casamance separatist movement and the central government in the nation's capital, one notes the creative efforts of university students to address the issue through peaceful means. Not only do students engage in dialogue amongst themselves over *attaaya*, or green tea, but in the more informal manner of soccer matches between students from the Casamance and students from the north. The players display a palpable regional pride yet play with respect for each other. When the match is over, the many spectators share in the joy of the winning team, regardless of its origins. Senegal's young intellectuals imagine peace between the two regions and so they collaborate in such a way, subtly demonstrating their stance on the university soccer fields. It is this type of alternative discourse that characterizes the student body at UGB when it is unable or unwilling to participate in the organized colloquia hosted at the university.

On the campus of *l'Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis*, when the state bureaucracy proves ineffective, when students are not receiving their stipends to buy food and academic materials, when all is quiet in the classrooms, whistles blow and young men, even young

women on occasion, run through the sand playing soccer. The varied team configurations and compositions speak to the diversity and great tolerance of this nation, as well as the constant consideration of new ways to form and imagine one's participation in it.

Endnotes

- ¹ Idea of "imagining the nation" is inspired by Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1983.
- ² Sarr, Ndiawar. "Improving Innovation Climate in Higher Education," A case study prepared for the Regional Training Conference on the Improvement of Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: (What works!). Accra, 23-25 September 2003