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**Social Significations and Promotion of  
Dan'straditional Games**

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## **Social Significations and Promotion of Dan's traditional Games**

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### **Abstract**

This survey shows the role of traditional games in the Ivorian society. It was carried out in Tonkpi region. Its aims at valorizing and promoting traditional games, which are waning in Cote d'Ivoire. Traditional games disappearance is the symbol the declining of a part of Ivorian culture. For this qualitative survey we used sociohistorical, phenomenological and strategic approaches. It allows us to identify the social significations of traditional games in Tonkpi. These games symbolize the cultural, ideological, and educational identity, and also determine the social status of the actors. There are some endogenous and extraneous constrains to the promotion and the valorization of traditional games of Yacouba people living in rural areas such as Voungue, Bantegoin and Yebegoin. Concerning the extraneous constrains we have school and the propagation of depravation by means of Information Technologies. At the level of endogenous factors we have the rupture of the social link of transmission between generations and the monetization of relations. In order to cope with these issues some suggestions have been made such education and professionalization of these games.

**Keywords:** cultural leisure, traditional games, social signification, promotion, valorization.

## Introduction

Leisure is a mean to achieve social welfare and an instrument to mobilize citizens around different domains of interest. Leisure puts individuals in a state of availability and not in a state of “easiness”. It contributes to a healthy use of time. According to the 24th article of the universal declaration for human rights: “Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay”. The right to leisure is for all. Leisure activities are diverse and multiform as cultural specificities in the world. The colonial administration has introduced many changes in the way African communities function. Western way of life has integrated and modified African cultural styles and foundations. Many factors contribute to the modelisation of the cultural wealth of a society, among which a peculiar form of leisure, that is to say traditional games (M. Vigne and A Oboeuf, 2013). These traditional games are replete with meaning and play an essential role in societies. They represent also an important part of the culture and the cornerstone of societies.

However in Cote d’Ivoire, there is no harmonious coexistence between endogenous and exogenous leisure. Traditional societies are declining. Traditional games are also progressively disappearing in cities and rural areas. Western leisure has invaded cities and villages at the detriment of traditional leisure. We are therefore confronted to a phenomenon of acculturation or westernization of urban leisure. In fact most of the tools of leisure come from the west. On the one side, diverse form of electronic games (play station, Nintendo etc...) sportive leisure (soccer and basketball) and cultural leisure (modern music) are all imported. On the other side we are confronted to the disappearance of traditional games which are unknown by young generations. This situation is alarming in the sense that it leads to the loss of some keys values. Africans in general and Ivorians in particular are confronted to an ambivalent and uncomfortable situation. Even though they are not interested in modern leisure, they also don’t take part to traditional leisure activities. In fact most of them don’ practice any leisure activities during their spare time. So we can assert that the right to leisure is not effective for some Ivoirians. In a country which is involved in a reconstruction process the need of people for relaxation has become crucial in order to be more productive. In such a context the abandonment of traditional games has become problematic.

In order to cope with this issue the department in charge of leisure has carried out since 2017, some actions in view of promoting traditional games in different cultural areas of the country.

In this prospect a monographic survey has been carried out in 2017 in Tonkpi region (Man and environs). This mountainous region is endowed with tourist potentialities (cultural and natural).

However they are under-exploited. When it comes to culture, traditional games are still unknown and under-exploited. They don’t contribute to the local development. How to promotes and valorize traditional games in Ivorian regions precisely in Tonkpi? This article will bring some answers to this question.

After the presentation of a detailed, methodological and theoretical approach, this article will review some traditional games from this region and their social

significations. Then it will analyze the constraints related to the promotion and the valorization of these games as well as the reasons why they are disappearing and eventually make some suggestions.

## **Methodological Approaches**

### *Geographical and Social Context*

This study is based on traditional games was carried out in Tonkpi region especially in Man and environs. Man is a city situated in western Cote d'Ivoire. It is located at five hundred kilometers from Abidjan.

Man is mainly inhabited by Dans. It was nicknamed "the town of 18 mountains" because it is surrounded by a mountain chain. Man is derived from "Manlé" who was sacrificed by her father Gbê chief of the canton of Gbêpleu at the end of nineteenth century. According to the general census of population of 1998, in 2015 about 212 220 people will inhabit Man.

Owing to the cultural and traditional aspects of the information to be collected we have prioritized rural areas namely Voungue, Bantégoin and Yebegoin. These villages belong to the Yacoubas. They are included in the canton of KAH. The first one is locate at five kilometers from Man. The second one as well as the third one are situated at six kilometers from Man.

In these localities we have interviewed the chieftaincy and populations. We have taken into account notions such as gender and age groups (young, adults, and elderly people).

Therefore the social field encompasses:

- The chieftaincy their notabilities;
- The representing of the youth;
- Elderly people or adults.

### *Sampling, Techniques and Tools for Data Collection*

We have selected in every village people to be interviewed either in a reasoned way or by recommendation. In other words we have used two non-probabilistic sampling techniques namely the purposive and the snowball sampling techniques.

The reasoned way can be seen through the Interview of the chieftaincy and their notabilities. They are the embodiment of traditions. They contribute to the historical approach of communities and games. While resorting to them we have access to more "free" people and more information. The reasoned way is very important. It allows us to cope with issues like gender and age groups which are essential for the representativeness of the sample.

Given that it is a qualitative study we have chosen a semi -directed interviews to collect information from our resource persons. To be more explicit, we have interviewed forty-five persons individually and resorted to four focus groups. Two

focus groups with three people one with two and the last one with six. Therefore fifty-nine persons took part to this survey.

### *Analysis Methods*

For a better description of the situation of traditional games in Tonkpi region we used the following analysis methods:

- The Sociohistorical approach (R. Payrer, G. Pollet, 2014) allows us to comprehend the changing context of games and their impacts on ancient and present societies;
- The Phenomenological approach (E.Husserl,1907) in order to fathom experiences and connect what is subjective to what is real;
- The Strategic analysis (M.Crozier, E. Friedberg, 1977) put the stress on the dynamic relation between actors and games, and also the significations they give to games.

## **Signification and Logic of Promotion of Traditional Games in TONKPI**

This part will deal with the description and the social significations of games, the constraints related to the promotion and valorization of these games and present some suggestions made by the interviewed.

### *Description and Social Significations of Games*

#### Description

Dan people call games “TROHO” especially those who speak Yacouba. This term is used for all that is related to entertainment. There are diverse types of games in Tonkpi and this survey will pinpoint the most significant.

The most famous game of this region is GUEBIA that is to say “race of masks”. It is the combination of “GUE” which means mask and “BIA” which stands for race. People from this region are impassioned by this game. All the villages from Tonkpi come to compete as well as those from beyond this region.

According to the director of Koble’s foundation which is the museum of tradition located in Man, Guébia was a response to many social issues. In ancient time, people have to cope with natural problems. They had to deliver messages as fast as they could. Every village was involved in the “game”.

Yacouba people are renowned for the diversity of their masks. Every mask has a specific characteristic and function. For instance a wading mask is symbolizes speed (see picture).

Many people take part to Guebia so it is essential to take into account the leisure time of each one. As a matter of fact it varies from one area to the other.

One of the element to be taken into account in the determination of the period for the organization of Guebia is farming work period. Guebia was then organized

after harvest time. This period was of course influenced also by natural hazardousness.

Guebia is practiced by men but women support is much appreciated. Guebia gathers all the social groups of the village namely kids, youngsters, elderly people, men and women. They play the role of players, referees, observers or supporters.

EUDEUM, is a game dedicated to kids. In this game two groups of five to ten kids are opposed.

While holding their breath and pronouncing the word “euedeummm” without interruption, the players move from the departure line, to the arrival. Those who cannot keep on pronouncing this word till the arrival line are eliminated. As the game goes on the distance between the departure line and the arrival one is progressively increased. The end objective is to see who will be able to hold his breath during a long period.

This competition takes place during dime time when people return from their farms or during public holidays or market days. It does not need a complex organization, so it can be organized on a regularly.

NEMANGOUEU or “nine pebbles”, it is a typical female game played by nine women. It takes place at moonlight and can be practiced everywhere. The nine women form a circle and every woman has only one pebble that she has to transmit to another player on her right side and so on. Women sing as they pass the pebbles to one another.

The more the song is accelerating the more the more the transmission of the pebbles is also accelerating. The one who has at the end of process two pebbles is eliminated. This game is about to disappear.

GON or MANH, it looks like wrestling match. It is only practiced by men. Women are just onlookers and supporters. This game highlights the physical strength and intelligence of the players. The aim is to bring down the opponent. Every wrestler uses peculiar techniques and craftiness to defeat his opponent.

OUELEUSISI means “lift up a mortar”. Players are asked to lift up a mortar with their teeth. It is a game reserved to youth and used for a show of strength. Every player will try to win and demonstrate his bravery in the presence of traditional authorities and populations.

According to the chief of Yebegoin this game is organized during festivities or after harvest time.

WIN NEU also known as AWALE is a game of brain and anticipation. Awalé is a combinatory and abstract board game. In this game players have to distribute pebbles, seeds, or shells in different holes. Sometimes the holes are dug in the ground. The board use to play that game is called « WINNEUKPO’N ». At the onset of the game forty-eight seeds are distributed into two distinct rows of six holes each. In each hole there are four seeds. Both players sit face to face, and each of them behind his row. Then they select the rotation direction and the one who will start the game. The first player select one hole in his row, picks up four seeds and in the others holes. He starts by his own camp. When he has emptied the first hole then he passes to the second one, then the third one, and so one according the rotation direction till he reaches the row of his opponent. If his last seed falls in one of his opponent holes, he can confiscate the content of the holes of his

opponent anytime that he finds two or three seeds in it. In Tonkpi WIN NEU is practiced by adults and elderly people essentially male. However it is not forbidden to women. They play to WIN NEU after farming works, in the afternoon.

### Social Significations (definition, roles and values of games)

The identification of the period when traditional games take place allow us to comprehend the social representations of leisure time. We came to understand that for the great majority leisure activities are during their spare time. But there are some specificities due to two elements which are communities and professional specificities.

In rural areas such as Voungue, Yebegoin and Bategoin they do not have leisure time at any time. Dan in general and Yacouba have a specific time for leisure.

In rural areas as well as in cities we have identified a short and a long leisure time. By short leisure time we mean daily leisure time. They come just after farming works. In the villages these leisure time are situated between 4 and 6 PM for the elderly people and the kids, 6 and 8 PM for youngsters and women. In fact between 4 and 6 PM, they are all back from farms, while youngsters and women are in the kitchen or are performing some tasks, elderly persons and kids are playing.

Leisure time can also be long, when it requires preparation by reason of the participation of many villages. In Tonkpi long period of leisure happened between December and March. During this period farming works are reduced. In other words we can talk about “farming works holiday”.

We can also classify traditional games according to the cycle of life.

For the kids and the adolescent we have the game of breath “EUDEUMM”. As for young adult we have wrestling “GON or MANH” and also the game of mortar “OUELEUSISI”. “GUEBIA” is for adults male whereas adult female play “NEMANGOUEU”. Finally adults and elderly persons from both sex practice AWALE “WIN NEU”. In every case the game has a specific signification.

- For the kids and adolescents: the game of breath “EUDEUMM”.
- This game demonstrates your ability to hold your breath for a long time. According to elderly people, it is a tool use for the detection of the best hunters, able to hide and be at one with nature, without any noise: “When you see a young man hunting with adult hunters, that means that he is a good at EUDEUM. He can hide somewhere without breathing”. It is a male game use for a defensive purpose and also to test endurance.
- For young adults : traditional wrestling or “GON or MANH” and the game of mortar or “OUELEUSISI”
- These male games are used for the demonstration of strength and have a defensive purpose. It is utilized for the detection of the strongest man of the village who will able be face another strong man from another village. In fact in ancient time a conflict between could be solved through the fight

of two people. Therefore these games were used to settle conflicts between villages.

- For women: nine pebbles or NEUMANGOUEU
- This game enhances women's skills and is a tool of reconciliation because cowives are compelled to transmit pebble and respond to the song intoned by the other women. It is a
- means for single women to draw the attention of male onlookers. In one word it is a game of conciliation, peace and social cohesion.
- Male adults: masks race "GUEBIA"
- GUEBIA is one of the symbol of the Yacouba's identity. Every village has his "Gué ". The mask race is a way used by villages to exert dominion to each other. The "Gué" who has won the "Bia" will enjoy public renown and privileges. It symbolizes a relation of dominance between villages. This is for the demonstration a male power.
- Adults and elderly persons from both sex: AWALE or WIN NEU
- It is a mixt game, practiced especially by elderly persons. It does not require physical strength but cognition. It enhances abilities to calculate, concentration and wisdom. It prepares people for some trades such as trader.
- In brief, traditional games are crucial because they mirror people way of life. They are also training institute for generations and symbolize cultural identity and peace in rural areas including in Tonkpi.

#### *Constraints Related to the Promotion of Traditional Games in Tonkpi*

#### Factors Contributing to the Disappearance of Games

Despite their usefulness, the great majority of traditional games have already disappeared or are about to disappear. Many factors have been identified such as school, monetarization of social relations between generations and the propaganda of depravation. According to politicians school is a source of development, but formal education raises also many concerns. It is the main cause of the disappearance of traditional games and also responsible of the decline of culture in Tonkpi.

In Man and environs, the construction of primary schools and the promotion of schooling policy have undermined the impacts of parents in the education of their kids.

"With the advent of schools, we do not see our kids during daytime. They spend all their in the village, while we are in the farms" declared a respondent.

" Actually nobody can ask his son to play. Families are competing for sending their children to school. Those who have sent many more children are boasting about that in the village, while those who have sent less remain silent " declared another respondent.

School is perceived in the villages a means for the promotion of western culture which are supposed to be "superior" to local culture.

As far as the disappearance of traditional games is concerned, a traditional dignitary from Voungue said: “School is the main cause of the declining of traditional games, kids are now interested in computer and online games. Only a few organize leisure activities and form playing groups during holidays. But they are not interested in traditional games. They come with modern games to show that they are civilized.”

This assertion demonstrates that school is a vehicle used for the transmission of western values. Traditional dignitaries do not have a good perception of “school” and its values which are marginalizing the cultural foundations. The relation of dominance of a foreign culture on local cultures do not contribute to the promotion of traditional games. Rival families boast about the abilities of their children to acquire western values.

Traditional values are disappearing from school yards and in festivities in villages. In addition, in rural areas prompted by their parents and teachers, kids are adopting modern culture. This situation is in line with what C. Treger (2012) noticed about Breton traditional games in France.

As for the monetarization of social relations respondent noted “In my village, Yebegoin we have organized a festival of OUWIZI in order to promote traditions. At this occasion games and dances are highlighted. It lasts three or four days and it is organized once in a year. But at a certain moment we have realized that youngsters were reluctant and did not come anymore to learn how to play these games. When we questioned them, they also asked us: what profit will we make from this?”

They only come when they are informed that a senior official is coming, because they know that he will give them money.

To organize an event or to participate to games for a profitable purpose, is one of the essential characteristic of leisure activities. The above verbatim transcript depicts the situation of villages in Tonkpi. In fact economic dependence impacts basic relations in rural areas. Nothing is free. Youngsters as their role model want to earn lot of money from whatever they do. Practicing and mastering a game is a powerful source of wealth.

Youngsters want to earn their living while playing a game such as artists, or those who practice leisure sport like chess draught games, Awalé, etc. They are not interested in promoting cultural identity. This is confirmed by the results of the focus groups:

“Nowadays, no one is ready to waste his time. Life is expensive. You yourself are doing this for money!”;

“There are many things to buy. I prefer digging out cassava, setting up traps or looking for a job.”

“You yourself have come to visit us, we have accepted to talk to you, but it is not free. We know that you will buy us rounds of drinks won’t you.”

This verbatim report attests the monetarization of sociocultural relations. “Digging up cassavas” and sell them, “setting up traps” and sell the game or “searching for a job” or work for another person for a daily remuneration. This how people perceive social relations.

Concerning the rupture of social link between generations, through the observation of the behavior of the respondents who lived in Voungue, we have realized that there is a day off and it is on market days. During this period youngsters remain far away from elderly persons. The latter are fully aware of that situation. They said: “Do you hear these noises? These are the young men, go and look at what they are doing. When we were young we spent our time our elders. We fetched the Bangui (palm wine) and served them. We also listened to their advices and observed their behaviors. But look, today is a day off, but I am alone there is no youngsters. I myself have given you a seat. You are my only visitor for this day. How could they learn from us? How could we transmit our knowledge to them?” (Verbatim report of an elderly respondent).

Youngsters said:

“elderly persons do not instruct us, they do not trust them;”

“We want to be free and drink at whim. When elderly people are around, it is impossible”;

“These elders, hmm! They are witchcrafts, the village is entangled in this situation because of them”.

Youngsters acknowledge the breach and justify the rupture of confidence.

With regard to the propaganda of depravation of mores, elderly people in rural areas in Tonkpi do not trust their youngsters. As a matter of fact Bantegoin’s chief said: “drug has reached our village. We cannot entrust our youth with something because fetishes do not like evil things.”

“You cannot dance with a mask and have a weird hair style like a disc jockey or drink excessively when you are involved in tradition. You must be a model” said a notable from Yebegoin.

For the custodians of traditions sacred things should not be taught to drug addicts or to those who indulge in vices.

#### *Valorization of Traditional Games in Tonkpi*

Traditional games are important because they are of social cohesion, togetherness, and peace in villages. Therefore it is important to preserve them. It is urgent to make a census by region to identify resource persons and traditional custodians in order to set up formal framework of transmission. It is important to set up in our educational system mechanisms for learning and practicing traditional games. Thus youngsters will be regularly in contact with cultural games. The restoration of a climate of confidence between generations is also crucial. In the current context it is necessary to motivate people practicing traditional games the organization and the professionalization of games. It is also essential to set up a mechanism for learning and practicing traditional games, as it has been done in Senegal with traditional wrestling (National Center for Popular Education, NCFPE, 1985) and in Mauritania (A.O Beibeny, 1998). Thus young people will be regularly in contact with traditional games.

From now on, a stress should be put on the funding of programs for the valorization of cultural activities including traditional games. The creation of knowledge based on traditional games in Cote d'Ivoire is necessary in order to comprehend and respond to development problems in the regions.

Cote d'Ivoire via the ministry in charge of leisure must take ownership of the actions of decentralized structures (town halls, regional councils), international institutions such as the games of la Francophonie. It must also take into account the actions for the preservation of cultural heritage made by UNESCO in view of valorizing the games in Tonkpi.

### **Discussions: Traditional Games and Development**

Cote d'Ivoire hopes to be an emerging country by 2020. The double-digit economic growth has led to the acceleration of the infrastructural development. But development is not reduced to economy and infrastructure. Development in order to be sustainable needs to include cultural development. In that respect, promoting cultural leisure especially traditional games which is the embodiment of cultural identity turns out to be a powerful asset to achieve that cultural development. These games are the mirror of a culture. They take the shape of body gestures. They are related to the history of people. Emerging in a specific social context, the game responds to needs and give life to accepted emotions. To play is to adhere to a way of life, to a relation with one's space and to the others. The context of leisure activities is fundamentally impregnated by elements such as norms, technical characteristics and modes of sociability or tolerance to violence. Game while progressing or ending is marked by rituals, values which represent way of being and of doing. "Playfulness is above all ethno-playfulness". The game is also an artisan of culture. It shapes and promotes values (P.Parlebas, 2003).

Dan people of Cote d'Ivoire uses the expression "TROHO" for games and all that is related to entertainment. J. Huizinga (1981, 18) has provided a more detailed definition "game is a voluntary activity or action carried out in a specific time and place. It has rules freely accepted but necessary. It has also a purpose. It raises feelings of contentment and tension and also the awareness of being different ". Therefore leisure and game share the same reality with notions such as entertainment, free will activities after performing social, familial and professional obligations and also hedonism.

The understanding of the game in the context of this survey is in line with the definition of (P.Parlebas, 2003). Body gestures far from being fortuitous represent a cultural shaping and also a significant personal investment. These elements are indicative of the social allegiance.

However while highlighting the rupture between the games of Renaissance and Olympics games, P. Parlebas assumes that the development of traditional games implies the adoption of new cultures based on the mutations of the world. In a certain extent the rupture that he talks about could represent an outright abandonment of traditions in favor of modernity.

The results of this survey do not allow us to share this approach in the sense that the modification and the insertion of some do not mean that there is a rupture with traditions. The disavowal of some modern practices by the villagers is the symbol of their refusal to give up their cultural origins. In Tonkpi region rural populations are nostalgic about their ancient values. The development of traditional games shall necessarily take into account foundational traditional values. It shall be made in terms of cultural complement and not in terms of rupture.

Thus there is a difference between local and international professionalization. Senegalese traditional wrestling for instance is different Olympic wrestling. Leisure activities could be understood from different perspectives and according to the context.

Moreover the study on the one hand shares the assertion of M. Guedenon (2001) who said that the disappearance of traditional leisure activities is due to the influence of western culture on Beninese culture via school and media which are two tools used for the propagation of their culture.

On the other hand, this work contradicts this assertion because it highlights endogenous factors which are the root cause of the disappearance of traditional games such as the crisis of social links, the breach in the process of transmission of values. There is also the lack of funding for leisure activities, owing to the lack of social representations of leisure in decision making processes. All these factors are not linked to western culture. Finally the survey as well as the above mention authors, shows the necessity to promote traditional games because local communities blossom through them.

Through the results of this study we can classify traditional games in a descending order. We have four games of competition out of six. The competition games are Guebia (masks race), Eudeum (breath exercises), Gon or Manh (wrestling match) and Oueleusisi (mortar game). There is also a game of reconciliation and cohesion that is to say Nemanguoueu (nine pebbles). Finally we have one brain game (Awalé or WIN NEU).

While comparing this survey to the work of R. Caillois (1958) who has identified four principles or playful attitudes (competition, imitation/simulation, chance and dizziness), we can identify on point of commonality and two differences.

The point of commonality lies in the identification of competition games in each context. The differences consist in the following points:

- For the first divergence, he asserts that it is only in modern and contemporaneous societies that people play games based on principles of competition and chance whereas traditional societies are in illusion, in fiction (R. Caillois quoted by J-F. Morissette, 2010: 65). The present survey on traditional games which has been carried out 60 years later shows that Dan people in Cote d'Ivoire have competition games. This conception based on the historical progress of societies as it has been developed by R. Caillois derived from an Eurocentric thought J-F Morissette (2010; 65).

- As second point of divergence unlike R Caillois who relates masks to imitation games/mock trial, the present study relates masks to the principles of competition and not of fiction or imitation.

Therefore we can say that games are a fact of civilization and also African culture has its own specificity.

## **Conclusion**

Development is first and foremost cultural and depends on a sustainable economic and social model. All these models of development rely on the culture of people. “Traditional games as well as culinary art, architecture and patois for instance are linked to a specific culture. This culture is located in a particular geographic area and embodies a regional identity.

They belong to a popular culture and derived from the historical heritage of humanity” (M Vigne and C Dorville, 2009). The problem with African countries in general and Cote d’Ivoire in particular is that they want to be developed, without any cultural foundations.

Traditional games play an important role in culture. However they are declining. That is what we observed in Tonkpi region western Cote d’Ivoire. These games are pregnant of significations and symbolise the identity of people. This survey carried out in YEBEGOIN, VOUNGUE and BANTEGOIN showed the social role of traditional games.

They are factors of cohesion, defence, and also of determination social tasks. They are also factors of union, identity education, etc.... In this these villages the root causes of the disappearance of games are school, the monetarization of their relation with games (that is to say they want to play a game only for a financial purpose). There is also the breach of the link between generations. In addition we have the propaganda for the depravation of mores. When they come into contact with modernity traditional elements lose their values and are progressively abandoned by new generations. Therefore the custodian of traditions must transmit traditional games to new generations on the one hand and on the other hand they must valorise traditional games. In that respect UNESCO and la Francophonie can help Cote d’Ivoire as well the policy of decentralization. Traditional game is for individual, his family, his community and for the entire community an extraordinary instrument of liberation, health and of equilibrium. Traditional game has its own virtues. It represents the time for discovering oneself and others. A time dedicated to the experience of pleasure and to feel as human being, a human from here (C Charron, 1977)

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