

## Hooliganism in Gabon: African exception or Gabonese particularities?

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### ABSTRACT

African football has been dynamic for many decades. Hooliganism is also present on this continent. While all other countries are affected by acts of hooliganism, Gabon has been spared from this type of sports violence until very recently. The political instrumentalization of football, its use as a "modern watchtower", but also its use as an educational vehicle, have contributed to both the enthusiasm for the game and the framing of the game. The apologetic function of this practice appears exemplary here, although weakened by the political oppositions that undermine the country. While there is no "traditional" hooliganism, the violence surrounding the national team's results questions the political role of this sport in the country.

**Keywords:** hooliganism, football, Gabon.

The development of football is global. However, African football is not fairly represented in international competitions. The International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), under the influence of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), orchestrates a serious obstruction that has prevented, and still prevents, the extension of the number of places "offered" to countries outside Europe for World Cup qualifying. This "Eurocentrism" has led to "significant prejudice" against African countries since the 1960s<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, football in Africa is dynamic and particularly spectacular for many decades, many African players play in European leagues.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Darby, "Africa and the World Cup: FIFA Politics, Eurocentrism and Resistance", *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 22, n°5, September, 2005, p. 883-905.

It is common to associate football and hooliganism in most countries of the world, forgetting that, in some countries, other sports may be affected (basketball in Greece and Turkey or cricket in India, for example) by the violence of sports crowds. What about African football in terms of violence? Gabon appears to be relatively spared, unlike some of its close neighbors such as Cameroon, or others further away such as Benin, Egypt or even Algeria, the list is not exhaustive. This observation is all the more surprising as sports violence is a recurrent phenomenon, whatever its form (heckling, incivility, symbolic and verbal violence, land invasions, brawls, riots, homicides, destruction of property and equipment) and whatever the location. Football is, however, the king of sports in Gabon, bringing together and opposing many fans as passionate and fanatical as their African or European counterparts. The enthusiasm in the event of victories, but also the turmoil in the event of defeat, caused by the results of the *Panthers* (Gabon's national football team) in CAN (African Cup of Nations) testifies to this.

Let us first try to clarify the genesis of hooliganism and its African counterpart, particularly in Gabon. Then, we will specify the institutional issues surrounding Gabonese football. Finally, we will examine the violence of Gabonese supporters themselves.

### **FROM THE GENESIS OF HOOLIGANISM IN EUROPE TO HOOLIGANISM IN AFRICA**

Traditionally, in the collective imagination, the hooligan is of English nationality. He is young, male, socially maladjusted, delinquent in ordinary life, drenched in alcohol and uses the football match as a pretext to commit his misdeeds in the stadium.

It was in the late 1950s and early 1960s that hooliganism appeared in England<sup>2</sup>. Journalists and researchers, most of them sociologists, have observed an increase in organized violence, both outside and inside the stadiums. These violence mark the transition from a ritualized and Dionysian violence, relating to the logic of the game and the antagonisms it provokes, to an organized and premeditated violence<sup>3</sup>. From that time on, hooliganism was understood and characterized in its variances from its final expression, violence. This approach considers violence solely in terms of the act of committing or repressed transgression of established norms, which amounts to limiting itself to a traditional sociological definition of crime<sup>4</sup>. This definition externalizes the potential causes and excludes, in fact, other explanatory factors that are nevertheless highlighted in the field of juvenile delinquency: provocation, the historicity of antagonisms, cultural, ethnic or religious oppositions, the gap between expectations and the real situation, which often precede brawls, fights or riots<sup>5</sup>.

This categorization of hooliganism based on its types of production, however objective it may seem, does not in any way indicate how individuals come to commit such acts or, conversely, how certain clubs or countries, here Gabon in this case, can be protected from such violence<sup>6</sup>. Africa is now marked by an increase in acts of hooliganism. This is the case in North Africa, Algeria and Morocco, where since 2008<sup>7</sup>, many arrests have been made due to violence before or after football league matches. Morocco has even become a prototypical example of African hooliganism that resembles the drifts of European hooliganism some 50 years earlier<sup>8</sup>. This is

<sup>2</sup> D. Bodin, L. Robène, S. Héas, « Le hooliganisme entre genèse et modernité » *Vingtième siècle*, n° 85, 2005, p. 61-83.

<sup>3</sup> D. Bodin, *Le hooliganisme*, Paris, PUF, coll. QSJ ?, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> E. Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, Paris, PUF, 1895, édition 1997.

<sup>5</sup> M. Wiewiorka, *La violence*. Paris, Balland, coll. Voix et regards, 2004 ; S. Roché, *La délinquance des jeunes*, Paris, Seuil, coll. L'épreuve des faits, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> D. Bodin, L. Robène, S. Héas, *Sport and violence in Europe*, Strasbourg, Council of Europe Publishing, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.afrik.com/article13376.html>.

<sup>8</sup> D. Bodin, « Le hooliganisme au Maroc », Préface du livre de A. Bourkia *Des supporters ultras dans la ville. Un aspect de la violence urbaine*. Casablanca, Éditions La croisée des chemins, 2018.

also the case in West Africa, in CAN, or for example, during the match between Togo and Mali in October 2008, clashes between supporters caused about fifteen serious injuries<sup>9</sup>. These are just a few examples of the emergence of fan violence that has only increased since then.

Hooliganism is therefore not only Anglo-Saxon or even European, it concerns almost all the African countries in which football has developed. The violence is similar to that seen all over Europe. They are group-based and do so mainly, but not only, by young men. Such violence is often reinforced by the absence of preventive measures in most stadiums and by coercive measures that oscillate between massive and exaggerated deployment of police or military forces or, conversely, a total absence of law enforcement and prophylactic measures (searches and entry controls, segregation of spectators, etc.).

The stadiums, except for the major CAN matches, are in most cases obsolete and allow for free movement of the public. Almost all of them are flanked by a single platform and a handrail. It is not uncommon to see spectators moving around during the match, changing places to better follow the match.

If violence is group-based, fan groups do not always exist as such. Spectators are grouped by neighborhood, ethnicity and friendship networks. However, these groups have the same characteristics as European fan groups. They are communities that have a common language, emblems, culture and passionate support for their team in an up to absolute bottleneck<sup>10</sup> that, in a rage to appear<sup>11</sup>, can go as far as violence<sup>12</sup>.

#### **A FOOTBALL WITHOUT VIOLENCE?**

So how can we understand that Gabonese football seems less concerned by these problems? That violence is much less frequent there than in other countries, whether in the league or during the CAN? Three reading grids will be superimposed to better understand what seems to be particularism:

- The first one distinguishes Gabon from many other African countries by its sports structures, its economic wealth and its political stability... which must however be read in the light of the political stakes and the institutionalization of sport and more particularly football. However, the country's abundant economic resources only marginally benefit fan clubs and players, the best of whom choose to move to European clubs in France, Portugal, Belgium or the United Kingdom<sup>13</sup>. The low level of funding for the local league is far from exacerbating violence in Gabon's stadiums. There is no money, so there is little at stake, if not symbolic. There is a low level of violence in or near the stages.
- The second allows us to observe and interpret a number of incidents between spectators or supporters of football clubs throughout the world: the existence of supporters' clubs, the history of relations between supporters' groups (opposition or alliance), the functioning of these groups according to the "Bedouin syndrome", the

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.lequipe.fr/Football/20071015\\_134459Dev.html](http://www.lequipe.fr/Football/20071015_134459Dev.html). Ces affrontements témoignent d'une constance dans les oppositions puisque de violentes bagarres avaient eu lieu en 2005 et 2006 entre supporters de ces deux pays.

<sup>10</sup> C. Bromberger, *Le match de football. Ethnologie d'une passion partisane à Marseille, Naples et Turin*, Paris, éd. Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1995.

<sup>11</sup>A. Ehrenberg *Le culte de la performance*, Paris, Hachette, coll. Pluriel, 1991.

<sup>12</sup> D. Bodin, *Hooliganisme vérités et mensonges*, Paris, ESF, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> No less than 40 Gabonese players were pursuing a professional career in Europe in 2018-2019. We can mention the cases of Lemina in Southampton and Aubameyang in Arsenal; Bouanga in Saint-Etienne; Palun in Bruges... to mention just a few of them playing in the first division.

youth of supporters, the strong masculinity of the public, intergroup competition, sporting competition, etc.

- The third is the "consciousness of a small nation<sup>14</sup> where everyone knows each other". The strong feeling of popular awareness contributes to curbing the phenomena of radicalization of violence in the stadiums. It is as if, following Dominique Geslin<sup>15</sup>, the country and its national political class were afraid of disappearing or being dominated by powerful neighbors. This extremely strong feeling in the national political imagination leads political actors to tirelessly seek consensus and the resolution of their contradictions in a spirit of national unity that permeates "the world of football".

Another grid of interpretation is needed and must be positioned as a watermark of previous ones: football was supported by Omar Bongo Ondimba as his son supports it today. Football is a matter of state and concerns the image of the country. Good days, good results (or bad ones) from the national team, the *Panthers*, but also in a more prosaic way the club teams compete in the image of a country in the eyes of other African countries.

### FOOTBALL IN GABON: BETWEEN POLITICAL ISSUES AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Football is the king sport in Gabon. It attracts a large audience, whether during the team championship, which includes 14 clubs, or during the national team's home games. It is also the most practiced sport, whether in or out of school.

A simple visit to Libreville shows how much, as in most countries around the world, Gabonese children love to play football. This craze takes the form of an "image of Épinal". Gabonese young people play there everywhere and if they don't have a ball, they shoot who a ball, who a can, as long as the object rolls, teams are quickly formed on fields that, most of the time, are not. But young people play and imitate the best players in the world and, above all, the best Gabonese players. Because *Panthers* are a passion, they represent a model. The enthusiasm for football is all the stronger as a number of Gabonese players play in European clubs offering young Gabonese people the image of a successful expatriation. The television broadcasts and the income they receive validate this image of professional success through the use of a round balloon. The clubs have long been financed directly by the State, even though in 2018 the Gabonese first and second division clubs had "unanimously threatened to stop the championship definitively, if the Gabonese State did not pay the arrears of the 2016-2017 season and the 2017-2018 subsidy"<sup>16</sup>. The system has changed and the State has obtained that *Gabon Oil* finance not only football clubs, but also the Gabonese Office of School and University Sports, as announced by Alain-Claude Bilie-By-Nze, Minister of State for Sport on 12 February 2019 in an interview<sup>17</sup>. But is it different from what was done before? The State and *Gabon Oil* are so closely linked that Gabonese President Ali Bongo Ondimba appointed, on Friday 29 March 2019, Lionel Erwin Diambou, Advisor to the Director General of *Gabon Oil*<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Gabon is composed of about two million one hundred and twenty thousand inhabitants unevenly distributed over a territory of two hundred and sixty-eight thousand square meters where the population is mainly concentrated in Libreville, Port-Gentil and Oyem.

<sup>15</sup> J.-D. Geslin, *Jeune Afrique l'Intelligent*, 2006. <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/resultat.php?cx=partner-pub-2060893485468351%3Ar85hmv-qx9r&cof=GALT%3A%232d8ec4%3BGL%3A1%3BDIV%3A%23cccc%3BVLC%3A821520%3BAH%3Acenter%3BBGC%3AFFFFF%3BLBGC%3AFFFFF%3BALC%3Ad5081d%3BLC%3Ad5081d%3BT%3A32322%3BGFNT%3A821520%3BGIMP%3A821520%3BFORID%3A11&ie=UTF-8&site=search=www.jeuneafrique.com&sa.x=0&sa.y=0&q=geslin+l%27intelligent+2006#1084>

<sup>16</sup> <http://info241.com/faute-d-impayes-de-l-etat-les-clubs-gabonais-de-d1-et-d2.3496#mYbke1q2ZZacBMqF.99>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.union.sonapresse.com/gabon-sport/omnisportsentretien-avec-le-ministre-detat-charge-des-sports-alain-claude-bilie-nze-il-ete-decide-de-changer-le-modele-economique-19228>

<sup>18</sup> <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/amdb/blog/220419/gabon-oil-company-goc-lionel-erwin-diambou>

This organization makes it possible to establish a direct link between popular enthusiasm, the practice of football and the desire to use football for educational and political purposes. As Raffaele Poli and Paul Dietschy suggested, there is a need to "reflect diachronically on the links between football and politics in Africa"<sup>19</sup>.

Two clues are provided to understand these particular political links. The first is the choice of *Panthers* coaches. Officially, it is the Gabonese federation that chooses. But relations between the federation and the government are so ambiguous that it is possible to doubt that this choice was only a sporting one. Ambiguous to the point that FIFA had to ask in 2009 for the postponement of the last elections of the President of the Federation due to the interventionism of the Ministry of Sport in these elections<sup>20</sup>. Many of the coaches recruited, the Brazilian Fumont Jairzhino (2003 to 2006), the French Alan Giresse (2006 to 2010), the Spanish José Antonio Camacho (2016 to 2018), to name but a few, have the same profile: former international players converted into coaching and with coaching experience validated by major European or South American teams. Their track record speaks for itself. They were recruited to win the *Panthers* as well as to build fervor and show how much the government does not skimp on the means to qualify the national team.

The second indicator of the political valence of football in Gabon is the use of this sport by elected officials. They organize football matches during the holidays by offering libations to reinforce conviviality. There is no doubt about the educational goals that politicians seek through the practice of football. It is the national sport. The aim is to offer a healthy occupation through the practice of a sport that teaches team spirit to young Gabonese people. Political speeches are well established. There is no doubt that this sport will create social cohesion by strengthening dialogue between ethnic groups, regions, cities and districts in major cities. Sport, and more particularly football, has the particularity of bringing people together in the same place to better oppose them, the finitude of this antagonism being anchored in the carnival rites that follow the meeting<sup>21</sup>. But there is also no doubt about the desire to use this sport for "internal and external political" purposes<sup>22</sup>. The apologetic function of sport makes it possible both to promote the power in place and to consolidate it in the eyes of a very young population<sup>23</sup>, to strengthen Gabon on the international sports scene, which is partly to validate the regime in place and its policy, to allow a muffled surveillance of the population gathered during football matches, making the stadium and the meeting a kind of modern watchtower<sup>24</sup> that allows social control. Gatherings, expressions and statements made during football matches thus become the target of the authorities. The context in which the match of the third qualifying phase of the CAN and the World Cup was held in August 2009 in Libreville is an example of this and the conditions for organizing the match between Gabon and Cameroon highlight the phenomena of the exploitation of sport for political purposes. While the presidential election had just ended and gave the winner Mr. Ali Bongo Ondimba, son of President Omar Bongo Ondimba, the government maintained this sporting event despite the post-election context marked by popular demonstrations to denounce the victory in the presidential election of President Omar Bongo Ondimba's son. The situation was riotous. One of the socio-political effects sought by the government, by choosing to authorize the

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<sup>19</sup> R. Poli, P. Dietschy, « Le football africain entre immobilisme et extraversion », *Politique Africaine*, 102, 2006, p. 173-187.

<sup>20</sup> Gabon: FEGAFoot elections postponed by one month. [http://gaboneco.com/show\\_article.php?IDActu=11368](http://gaboneco.com/show_article.php?IDActu=11368).

<sup>21</sup> B. Jeu, *Analyse du sport*, Paris, PUF, Coll. Pratiques corporelles, édition 1992, 1987.

<sup>22</sup> J.-M. Brohm, *Sociologie politique du sport*, Nancy, PUN, 1992.

<sup>23</sup> The median age in Gabon is 18.6 years and 49% of the population is under 14.

<sup>24</sup> I borrow the term modern watchtower from François Courtine discussing the role of sport in French prisons in the 1980s. F. Courtine, « La 'sportification' pénitentiaire. De la 'roue' au 'Ballon... Prisonnier' », Thèse de doctorat de 3<sup>ème</sup> cycle, UER de sociologie. Université Paris VII, 1980.

organization of this sporting event, was social control by seeking, on the one hand, to reduce the tensions arising from a presidential election contested in violence by the opposition camp and, on the other hand, by maintaining a sporting event, which both played the role of *Panem* and *Circenses*<sup>25</sup> and divided the population numerically. Those going to the game not going to the demonstrations. While the match took place in acceptable security conditions, and gave Cameroon's Indomitable Lions two goals to zero against the *Panthers* of Gabon, only cries of popular disapproval were recorded when the speaker announced the presence of President-elect Ali Bongo Ondimba at the stadium. By his presence, he signed his support for the national team, showed his interest in football, thus attracting the "sympathy" of spectators, relegating opponents' demonstrations to gatherings of little interest in football. In the end, few incidents were reported.

Gabon is not an isolated example and the social and political issues surrounding football are found in many other African countries<sup>26</sup>.

The place of football is therefore complex, because while the country's sportification traditionally mobilizes an opiate function<sup>27</sup> among the Gabonese people, it also participates in the education of the country's young people, which has long been one of the government's main priorities with regard to health. Literacy and school enrolment rates are particularly high (72 and 83%) and the oil and mining wealth has enabled a quality education and sports policy. Given the major political challenges of education, promotion and image, football cannot become the scene of violent outbursts. The main sports events subject to local or community antagonisms are supervised by experienced police forces. This question is all the more fundamental because the country's political stability does not only require strong social control organized by a power often described as despotic and nepotism. Football represents an important social link between the fifty or so ethnic groups that make up Gabon and should not, on the contrary, become a place of conflict. Following Omar Bongo Ondimba's death, numerous riots refuted the upcoming elections and Ali Bongo Ondimba's candidacy had taken place. An inter-institutional sports meeting had even led to extremely violent riots for four days<sup>28</sup>. Ethnic tensions increased with the election campaign and urban riots in Libreville, among others, developed against the backdrop of an economic crisis and increasing poverty<sup>29</sup>. Gabonese football has a fourfold characteristic: a powerful means and educational lever due to the popular enthusiasm for the sport, a place for ethnic gathering and the construction/preservation of social ties, a potential theatre, violence and contestation of power in place, and a practical means for the State to ensure strong social control.

The football situation is all the more complex as clubs share a dozen stadiums. The largest can "officially" accommodate 40,000 people, but 10 stadiums have less than 7,000 seats. Three clubs share the Omar Bongo stadium (40,000 seats). The stadiums are very old and the Gabonese government, which won the 2012 CAN with Equatorial Guinea, has had to undertake very large rehabilitation programs. The territorializing of the sports area by the most fervent supporters, combined with cultural and ethnic oppositions, represents a potential powder keg. While the number of places is formal, on match days it is far from being respected. A large crowd is gathering everywhere, changing places during the game, partisan encouraging his

<sup>25</sup> According to the role played by the games in Ancient Rome. J-P. Thuillier, *Le sport dans la Rome Antique*, Paris, Errance, 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Poli et Dietschy, *op. cit.* ; B.P. N'Guessan, « Les enjeux sociaux et politiques autour du ballon rond. Mobilisation populaire autour de l'équipe nationale de football de Côte d'Ivoire en 2005-2006 », *Afrika spectrum*, 41/3, 2006, p. 443-453.

<sup>27</sup> Brohm, *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.afrik.com/article6972.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Le Monde.fr <http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2009/08/08/manifestation-contre-> ou encore [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2009/09/03/ali-bongo-aurait-ete-elu-president-du-gabon\\_1235130\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2009/09/03/ali-bongo-aurait-ete-elu-president-du-gabon_1235130_3212.html).

team while invectiveing the closest neighbors who support the opposing team. If the crowd is under control, security procedures are almost non-existent. Law enforcement usually intervenes after the fact. In fact, everything contributes to creating a potentially "violent" climate.

And yet, only the last election period saw real violence emerge in stadiums where clubs compete, mainly supported by large national and international companies. This factor is an additional indication of Gabon's exception in terms of violence in stadiums.

The low level of violence in Gabonese stadiums is due to the nature of the national first division championship organized around clubs representing civil service bodies (army, police) on the one hand and multinational companies and firms based in the country on the other (mining, construction and public works companies). Although some cities in the country are represented in the championship, the place of clubs financed by companies in the national championship is predominant. First or second division clubs include *Football club canon 105*<sup>30</sup> (FC 105) linked to the Ministry of Defense, *Sogéa football club* sponsored by the company of the same name specializing in the construction and public works sector (BTP), *Mangasport* club whose main shareholder is the mining company of Ogooué (Comilog) and subsidiary of the French group Eramet, the *Sports association of traders* in the city of Moanda (ASCM), the *Football missile club* linked to the army of land. Some of the country's major cities are nevertheless represented by their clubs in this national championship, such as the *Mandji stadium* in Port-Gentil, the *Sports union* in Oyem or the *Sports union* in Bitam. In fact, the supporters' sense of belonging and identification is more oriented towards the sports club than towards the city where it is located. This reality weakens the weight of ethnic logic that can exacerbate the phenomena of violence in stadiums by deactivating the weight of community sentiment attached to the territory where the clubs are located. Identification with the city or region is therefore much less than in European clubs. The rare acts of violence committed during football matches take place in the context of friendly matches between towns or villages where the identity of the territory and the village is at stake and is an issue.

### GABONESE SUPPORTERS AND SPECTATORS

Would Gabonese supporters and spectators be so different from their counterparts in the rest of the world that they would be practically the only ones not to resort to violence? A football match in Gabon, like almost everywhere in Africa, is first and foremost a great celebration that brings together a large, colorful, noisy and festive crowd. Football matches do not, at first sight, present as important antagonisms as there may be between fan clubs in most other countries of the world. Gabonese fans experience football matches as festive and recreational opportunities in which acts of violence remain limited and marginal. The causes of violence in stadiums, far from fueling inter-community hatred, are linked to strictly sporting issues: the losses recorded by the Gabonese team are experienced as a national humiliation. When the national team is defeated with a score deemed too high, fans commit acts of violence against their own players "who do not fight hard enough". These acts wash away the national humiliation felt by fans<sup>31</sup>. This violence can take on aggravated forms when fans feel that the players have not "wet the jersey" for the nation they represent. The distance to the role is questioned here through the question of national honor. Professional football is a high-risk

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<sup>30</sup> The Canon Football Club 105, has long been the property of Mr. Idriss Ngari, former Minister of Defence, close to the Gabonese Democratic Party, a political party whose candidates have held the presidential seat for over fifty years.

<sup>31</sup> L. Robène, D. Bodin, "Role Distance in Question: When it is No Longer Participating But Winning Which is Important", *International Journal of History of Sport*, Volume 31, Issue 16, 2014, 1975-1992.

profession in Gabon and more generally in Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>32</sup>. The history of Gabonese football<sup>33</sup> over the past fifteen years is rich in episodes of violence against national team players.

However, there are supporters, grouped in clubs, who have the same outrageous and even extreme behavior as their European counterparts. They come to see their team win and are ready for anything to do so: destabilize the opposing players, invective their counterparts supporting the opposing team, provoke and boo the referees. It is probably the number and degree of organization that differentiates them. While some fan clubs in France happily exceed the 6,000 most numerous members are here at most a hundred. Their age does not distinguish them from their European counterparts. They are young. But could it be otherwise when football is the king of sports, when it is played in schools, when clubs are encouraged and supported by political authorities and when the median age in Gabon is 18.6 years? The spectators are essentially men. Groups are formed by neighborhoods and ethnic groups. This grouping could generate violent antagonisms, but most of the time, all this remains at the invective stage. The layout and obsolescence of the stadiums, as well as the absence of excavations and palpitations, or even the segregation of supporters, generally favor action. This is not the case. It must be accepted that security measures in Europe have certainly made it possible to regulate violence in stadiums, but have also led to deviant and violent supporters adapting to coercive measures<sup>34</sup>.

Most spectators and supporters attend all matches. The atmosphere is festive, the encouragement and songs change according to the regions and clubs. The songs oscillate between devaluation of the opposing team and traditional songs: in Obamba for *Mangasport* and *Fang* for *US Bitam*. Thus described, it is indeed distinct communities with their own languages, codes, emblems, etc., that support their team. They have all the elements that could lead to violence. However, these sporting antagonisms are not usually followed by violence. Many people encourage their team by dancing to the rhythm of the drums. Magic is omnipresent in encounters. Witchcraft is part of the game. Beliefs in the supernatural remain very strong among Gabonese people who, whatever their religion, remain attached to traditional animism. It is probably at this level that football and power come together. Florence Bernault reminds us that magic, witchcraft and politics maintain close relations<sup>35</sup>. The team must win, because it builds the reputation of the policies that support it.

While sporadic clashes occur, they rarely turn into intergroup conflicts. They are most of the time a matter of opposition or personal affairs that are regulated in the stadium; more simply they result from the usual crowd phenomena - combining anonymity and excitement - but which essentially have their origin in the context of the game - contestation of arbitration, reactions to players' behavior on or off the pitch - and in heavy alcohol consumption. The small number of organized fan groups and the lack of politicization of the stands in previous years mean that Gabonese football is free of the intergroup conflicts that persist in the form of

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<sup>32</sup> In this perspective, let us mention the case of the players of the Côte d'Ivoire national team, whom the poor CAN performances, judged humiliating by General President Robert Gueï in 2000, had led to a stay in a military barracks to assimilate civility and patriotism and now play with "the heart and the feet".

<sup>33</sup> We will remember, for example, the Gabon-Morocco match in 1997 during which the Moroccan team beat the Gabonese national team by a score of 5 to 0. The players' poor sporting performances and the Gabonese team's bitter defeat are experienced as a popular humiliation and generate acts of violence committed by Gabonese supporters against the players of their national team.

<sup>34</sup> D. Bodin, L. Robène, "Hooligans, Casuals, Independents: Decivilisation or Rationalisation of the Activity?", *International Journal of History of Sport*, Volume 31, Issue 16, 2014, 2013-2033.

<sup>35</sup> F. Bernault, « Magie, Sorcellerie et Politique au Gabon et au Congo-Brazzaville » in M. Mve Mbkale, *Démocraties et mutations culturelles en Afrique noire*, Paris, L'harmattan, 2005, p. 21-39.



vendetta in Europe. When fights break out, law enforcement usually intervenes relatively quickly and forcefully, perhaps deterring other actors from imitating their counterparts. What's more, the friendliness is beyond anything else, the matches are a mixture of sport and fairs. The audience easily gets to know the players with whom they eat, drink and talk after the game. The quantitative importance of the audience plays a major role in this conviviality. It is not possible to manage 30,000 people in Europe like here by welcoming between 300 and 3,000 people. It is easier in the latter case to know everyone and everyone, to ask for news of each other, to call each other by name. It is also easier for authorities to identify troublemakers.

Moreover, the result is less important than elsewhere, the championship formula is such that the chances of maintaining or descending are known fairly accurately from the beginning of the season. It is therefore not surprising that beautiful play, aesthetics and entertainment are favored when the stakes in sport are lower. The sporting opposition is indeed relatively low, even if the passion is no less overwhelming here as elsewhere. Gabonese like players who fight for their team, wet the jersey, perform technical feats or fake the game, reminding us that "to win, you need merit, but also luck and even a little rascal"<sup>36</sup>. Three or four clubs share the spotlight. Interclub competition is therefore less. The best players play abroad. While it is fundamental for fans to see their team win, it is extremely rare for a result to lead to clashes. Football remains perceived, at the level of clubs and their supporters, more as a game than as an issue, recalling Bernard Jeu's words for whom "sport is the game that takes itself seriously"<sup>37</sup>. Gabonese football is a serious game. Players must "give it their all" and, above all, produce a show. Those who do not do so are booed. The matches are preceded and often followed by long speeches. But not only that. The end of the match was a great celebration: politicians and leaders competed generously to offer food and drink to all. Libations sometimes last several days in the case of very important matches. The bars are open. The post-match period is an opportunity for all the fans to exchange ideas, it is a popular festival in the strict sense of the word, with drinks, dances and traditional songs to accompany the end of the match and mark the end of the match. Bernard Jeu reminded us that the competition does not really end at the final whistle, but on the occasion of those rites that mark the end of the sacrifice that has just been played: exchange of jerseys, banquets and libations<sup>38</sup>. It is the communion of opponents that really marks the end of the game by temporarily and metaphorically abolishing the sporting hierarchy. These carnival rituals are the very end of the competition where the most humble are associated with the leaders and politicians. While football is exploited by the government and politicians in power, for a long time there has been a clear desire on the part of the government to promote social cohesion and friendly relations between the various ethnic groups by all means possible. Football is one way among others to achieve this goal.

### **ELECTIONS AS A PRETEXT?**

However, the last elections changed the situation somewhat. Opponents of Ali Bongo Ondimba's election did not hesitate to give a voice in stadiums to denounce the old regime and the elections, affirming a desire to see the country change leaders and the refusal to see the son succeed his father. Within a few weeks, stadiums and football became ideological forums and the starting point for opposition and violence that Gabonese football had previously known little about. This ideologization of the forums probably reflects the lack of means for some opponents to make their voices and agendas heard in other more traditional ways. It also testifies, once again, to the instrumentalization of football by politicians who find it an

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<sup>36</sup> C. Bromberger, *Football, la bagatelle la plus sérieuse du monde*, Paris, Bayard, 1998, p. 112.

<sup>37</sup> B. Jeu, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>38</sup> B. Jeu, *Ibid.*

interesting medium to reach the greatest number of people. However, the problem of ideologizing the forums is not limited to opposing the current regime or the underlying political discourse. In most countries where football and supporters are instrumentalized, it raises problems of identity construction by antagonistic acculturation that serve as a ferment and foundation for the spiral model of violence, which can range from the most trivial small events to massacres and various forms of cruelty. The danger is great, because it is not only football that is at stake in this violence, but also the national unity of a country suffering from an increase in poverty and socio-economic problems that are already generating strong protests.

However, intra-national football remains largely unaffected by the violence of sports crowds. We should not believe that the political debate has perverted the sporting spectacle to the point of transforming the stadiums into places of all violence. The danger exists and the introduction of political ideologies may, like football in England from the 1970s to 1980s, see the use of violence multiply, through the combination of the economic crisis, the decline in social integration processes, the ever-increasing dualization of Gabonese society for the benefit of the richest, the challenge to the government in power and disappointment at seeing any political change aborted. Violence could then become a means for the excluded, or opponents, to transform inequality and exclusion from debate into social and political success, exclusion into social and political recognition. Violence would then have a political status as a class struggle, which Gabonese football is very likely to metaphorize and raises the question of the tenuous relationship that exists between sport and violence, football and violence<sup>39</sup>.

On the other hand, it must be said that support for *Panthers* generates a partisan passion that sees many excesses. This passion and desire to see the national team win is combined with the search for the regional hegemony that is at stake in a CAN qualification. The latest results have shown this. Coach Daniel Cousin was dismissed from his position as Gabon coach after the *Panthers* were eliminated in qualifying for the 2019 CAN in Egypt from 21 June to 19 July, with the *Panthers* finishing third in their group behind Mali and Burundi.... a national shame, at least felt as such.

Achieving good results for the next CAN is becoming the major political issue in Gabonese football. The recent match between Gabon and Burundi on 23 March testifies to this intensity and a nationalist fever in which the Gabonese colors (yellow and blue green) have amply replaced the usual flocked t-shirts of the "*Go the Panthers*". The sporting challenge was somewhat transformed into a previous national challenge, announcing the predictable skirmishes that took place at the end of the match. Many stalls sold enough to support the team outside the security perimeter, emphasizing the importance of supporting the national team. Football crystallizes nationalist sentiment at a time when socio-economic problems are on the rise. Instrumentalization, creation of a rewarding identity through the expected results of the *Panthers*, all contribute to making the stadiums and CAN meetings a potential volcano in Gabon. What is peculiar is that the situation is exactly the opposite of European countries, which continue to experience violence before or after football matches, with violence in stadiums having disappeared thanks to the coercive measures implemented. European countries that experience little violence at national meetings. Perhaps this difference should be seen as the result of the instrumentalization of football for political and/or educational purposes that promote social cohesion, but at the same time strengthen nationalist sentiment.

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<sup>39</sup> D. Bodin, L. Robène, *Sport and violence: Rethinking Elias*, London, Routledge, Taylor and Francis group, coll. Sport in the Global Society - Historical perspectives, 2016. <https://www.routledge.com/Sport-and-Violence-Rethinking-Elias/Bodin-Robene/p/book/9781138213005>.