Sport in the French Colonies (1880-1962): A Case Study

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The colonizers began importing sport to the French colonies at the end of the nineteenth century. Imitating the physical exercises practiced in France under the Third Republic, “gymnastics,” a science of human movements, was the main form of physical exercise practiced in military and educational spheres. With gymnastics becoming compulsory in France at all levels of teaching since 1880, its military and patriotic aims were clearly reaffirmed: “[Gymnastics] is inseparable from military training. . . . We have therefore resolved to organize a serious and strong military education of which the teaching of gymnastics is the basis and the principle in all schools.”

The colonies did not escape the new legislation and were subject to reinforced measures because of their particular status of occupied territories. It took ten years, punctuated by many incidents of resistance, before sport, in the true sense of the word, could be practiced. These leisure activities, reserved for the European elite, were practiced within the closed context of sporting circles. Because the colonies served as arenas of competition among European forces, the English educational model established itself with ease there. England, under the influence of philosophers like John Locke, was in the forefront of the educational movement in nineteenth-century Europe. Because of her economic strength, Great Britain dominated the entire Old World in the field of culture. Her teaching innovations impressed the European elite who were convinced by notions such as “self-government” and “fair play,” prologues to the installation of a form of discipline that defined education through sport. Symbolically, by transposing the theories of “struggle for life”
and Social Darwinism that justified natural inequalities, sport constituted a well-adapted aid to colonial expansion. From Victorian England to Europe and the United States, throughout the British Empire and then successively to other European empires, sport had spread to the farthest regions of the globe by the end of the nineteenth century.

From Saint Pierre and Miquelon to New Caledonia to Terre Adélie, the French colonial empire, with some eleven million square kilometers and almost forty million inhabitants, constituted a vast territory characterized above all by its diversity: geographical, cultural, and human but also in the territories’ relations with France. One cannot compare the deep attachment that bound the four old colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana, and Réunion (the “confetti of the Empire”) to the mother country or the relations established with French trading posts within the British colonies (like Pondicherry and Chandernagor in India). How could one even begin to consider the immense territory of tropical Africa, so cruelly ill-equipped, the island of Madagascar with its divergent population, and Indochina in the Far East from the same perspective? Within this context, North Africa had a very particular status because it benefited from its proximity to mainland France, from its relatively numerous European inhabitants, and from France’s high expectations for it. Algeria was considered to be the experimental field of the colonial enterprise.

The aim of this article is not to examine all the questions concerning sport in the colonial environment (this would not be possible given the limited findings of current research) but rather to examine the unifying principles of implementation and dissemination of sport in the French colonies and to place them within the context of time period in which they were adopted.

Since the end of the 1990s, a dynamic pool of research on sport in the colonies has developed in French universities. This research concentrates on geographical, political, social, and cultural situations specific to a given territory. The work of Bernadette Deville-Danthu, the publication in 1992 of L’empire du sport (The Empire of Sport), and the cataloging of a photographic exhibition on sport in the old French colonies have stimulated a more general study of sport in the colonies through iconographic material.

The proceedings of a conference, De l’Indochine à l’Algérie, la jeunesse en mouvements des deux côtés du miroir colonial—1940-1962 (From Indochina to Algeria: Dynamic Youth on Both Sides of the Colonial Looking-Glass—1940-1962), examines “the development of European imperialism and the education of a dynamic youth, particularly in the context of sport and Scouting” in Indochina and Algeria. On the theme of “sport, leisure activities and tourism,” the CRESOI (Research Centre on Indian Ocean Societies), in partnership with other research centers, has embarked upon the exploration of a field of research that is still in its infancy—colonial questions associated with sport. The aim is to encourage research (publications, seminars, research supervision, conferences, etc.) and eventually to determine a basis for comparative analyses. The first work, entitled Sport et loisir dans les colonies—XIXème-XXème (Sport and Leisure in the Colonies—19th and 20th Centuries) considers confrontations and perspectives internationally from the point of view of sport in the colonies.

Pierre de Coubertin, who reinstated the modern Olympic games, was the fervent supporter of French colonization. At a time of colonial rivalry, he believed that sport could be used as an effective tool and could play “an intelligent and efficient role” in the colonization process:
We believe that sport, on the condition that it is not allowed to take on a too military aspect and a mold of regimentation that could help to prepare a future rebellion, we believe that sport must be encouraged down to the most popular ranks both in the native and in the ruling class. Sport is a vigorous instrument of discipline. It engenders all kinds of good social qualities such as hygiene, cleanliness, order and self-control. Would it not be better for the natives to be in possession of such qualities and would they not be thus more easily handled than otherwise? But, most of all, they will have fun.\footnote{10}

Within the context of historical methodology, our aim is to assess the objective role that gymnastics and sport played in colonial societies. Following the French tradition, we will distinguish between the notions of “gymnastics” and “sport,” two competing educational practices promoted by different actors. We consider gymnastics to be a systematic mode of exercise in which movements are determined in advance and classified in categories.\footnote{11} The word “sport” refers to competitive, institutionalized, and regulated physical activities. What are the educational, social, cultural, and political functions of gymnastics and sport in the societies that were subject to the importation of colonial models?

Paradoxically, sport in colonial societies was used as an instrument of colonization (i.e., of education, excellence, integration, assimilation) but also as a lever for decolonization (through associations, gatherings, struggle, and identity claim). This dual function, which became complex in the long run, occupied an original position where sports were practiced (regions, nations, continents), the types of colonization, and the periods under study. It is this general question that we intend to address with the help of historical and geographical examples taken from French colonies.

The structure of this article is fourfold with a classic, chronological division. The first part examines the military influence and the teaching of gymnastics: the “French method” during the height of the French colonial conquest (1880-1920). The years 1920-1939 witnessed the waning importance of gymnastics to increasingly popular colonial sport in all its diversity, promoted by various protagonists from military garrisons, religious congregations, and nondenominational state schools. The main interest of those two decades lies in the fact that sport, an educational tool par excellence, was tolerated, encouraged, or co-opted for the training of native elites with assimilation intended. It was very often used by said elites for purposes of emancipation. The Vichy regime (1940-1945), which ruled for a period between two and five years depending on the colony, was instrumental both in its extreme attempt to indoctrinate and to control the youth. It established overseas sporting policies, which in many respects continued after the war. Finally, during the years following World War II (1945-1962), the colonial regime was reduced due to the creation of the “Union Française” (French Union), and later the “Communauté” (French Commonwealth). The irreversible process of decolonization permitted easier access of sport for all.

**Gymnastics Rather than Sport: The Military Rule (1880-1920)**

On the strength of their pioneering role and with the help of an unrivalled training regimen for sport at the “Ecole normale de gymnastique” (Gymnastics Training College)\footnote{12} in Joinville-le-Pont that opened in 1852, the military made gymnastics its field of excellence, and even more so in the colonies.
“We have been led to enterprises in remote countries, out of the necessity to provide an activity for the army and the navy,” Jean-Marie de Lanessan, governor of Indochina, wrote in 1897. This means that the colonizer gave preference to military over political action, as shown by the appointment of General Joseph Galliéni in Madagascar or General Hubert Líautey in Morocco. In the early twentieth century, Southern Algeria was under military administration. Other than their standard role of conquest and defense, high-ranking military officers were in charge of native policies. Each territory was headed by a field officer appointed by a decree of the governor of Algeria who held the office of “Préfet” (government representative). By the Decree of 10 April 1907, each territory was subdivided into “circles,” “annexes,” and “posts” administered by officers.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, the empire contained a source of men that could be easily mobilized in case of conflict. General Charles Mangin, in his 1910 work *La force noire* (The Black Force), theorized about the principle of the physical and military preparation of overseas populations. Well-prepared for physical activity as a result of new laws as well as by combat preparation, the military were instrumental in implementing gymnastics initially and then sports within military, school, and civil units.

Colonial Garrisons and Military Training

“We should not be surprised that the Annamites [of central Indochina] ... take to sport; but it was the army that revealed the meaning of this word, as we understand it in the West, to them.” This comment by a columnist of *Le Monde colonial illustré* (Illustrated Colonial World) can be applied to all the French colonies. Indeed, as early as 1860, military personnel introduced physical and sporting activities in Indochina. The administration of this colony of the Far East was very authoritarian because it was headed by a succession of admirals, only to be replaced by civil administrators in 1879.

The military, concerned with Francisco Amoros’ principles of keeping the body in shape, systematically included a full program of exercise accompanied by fencing, horse riding, and shooting. Colonial authorities encouraged the creation of regiment sporting teams. Madagascar’s first sports club, “Le Casse-patte” (The Leg-Breaker) emerged from the 13th Colonial Infantry Regiment, as did the teams created in the provinces, especially Tamatave and Diego-Suarez. Meetings between military teams led to sporting competitions. Until the 1940s, the officers’ teams won all the first-place prizes. In order to develop a taste for physical exercise among the infantrymen, a General Jung, commander of the AOF (French West Africa) troops, ordered the creation of several sporting teams in which one-fourth or one-third of the soldiers had to participate.

After the First World War, the military systematically included the natives in their general training programs. Overcoming the natives’ reluctance and signs of passivity, military authorities implemented physical preparation in the most hostile environments. In Southern Algeria, in spite of adverse weather conditions (heat, sandstorms) and resistance from natives uninterested in this novelty, the officers concentrated on bringing sport to those who later became Sahraoui (Western Saharan) elites.

The army fostered the development of such sporting activities in the general public. At the 14th of July (French National Day) celebrations or during regiment festivities, the colonial army organized gymnastic feats for the numerous spectators. The choreography
of human pyramids was extremely impressive. In Antananarivo the demonstrations went well beyond apparatus work. The shows, intended to amuse as much as impress, were composed of several scenes and featured not only wrestlers, fencers, and boxers but also acrobats, tightrope walkers, jugglers, and clowns. Soon, sporting activities became more diversified to include ball games like rugby and soccer. As for infrastructures, the army played a pioneering role. It made its sporting facilities available to schoolchildren and civilians and very often designed and built stadiums and sports fields. The Redoute complex on Réunion Island and the Mahamasina Stadium in Antananarivo were parade grounds before they were converted to racing tracks with the center part reserved for soccer. For many years, the army was the main source of teachers for public and private schools in mainland France, and even more so in the colonies.

School Gymnastics and Patriotism

The Republicans used the Act of 27 January 1880, which made gymnastics compulsory in all schools, as a tool to develop physical and moral preparation, as well as to train youth for conscription. In a climate of debate on educational policies and a context of revenge (after France was defeated by Germany in 1870), the Republicans opted for “a union between the gymnast, the soldier and the schoolteacher” that “must help reinforce the military institutions, heighten patriotism and fire the unity of the nation.” The question, therefore, as Pierre Arnaud explains, called for the military to implement in the colonies the educational project designed in mainland France. This project had two complementary principles: to assimilate the local population and, at the same time, to strengthen national unity.

Réunion Island, where teaching gymnastics started very early, provides an edifying example of the union of gymnastics and the military. In certain schools, academic curricula were in line with national requirements as early as the 1870s. François Delvar, gymnastics teacher at Leconte de Lisle High School in St Denis from 1904 to 1907, embodied the development of gymnastics in colonial schools, as did his predecessor, a M. Duclos. A “colonial infantry corporal, holding the post of gymnastics teacher in the junior and high schools, with an allocation of 1,500 francs a year,” Delvar taught sixteen hours a week, the statutory working time for gymnastics teachers at the time. A strong tradition of military instructors was instituted in Leconte de Lisle High School. Joseph Gralle, who came from the army but also had a degree in education, succeeded Delvar and followed in his footsteps. He designed the first printed layout of a gymnastics lesson, aimed at developing the rib cage muscles and included a list of “recommended gymnastics games.” With the arrival of a M. Michel in 1914 and a M. Herberq in 1921, the entire Joinville school of gymnastics left its mark on the colony.

The Decree of 6 July 1882 created school battalions paid for by municipalities for “any public primary or secondary school or group of schools,” that became a center for military preparation and training. Criticized by the opposition for their ridiculousness and inefficiency, these battalions soon disappeared from the mainland. A symbol of military presence in the colonies, they spread there very early, as was the case in Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Tonkin, where they sometimes remained until 1939, in spite of their official suppression.
The assimilation project aimed at native populations in the colonies was not limited to the barracks and schools. It spread amongst the population, while remaining closely under control at the same time. The administrators encouraged the creation of school sport societies on the model defined in 1907 by the Ministry of Public Education. Each society was administered by a headmaster, and the regulations were all based on the same model. Under the leadership of former pupils, these societies extended themselves to the general public, offering physical education and military preparation programs. Approved and subsidized by the Ministry of War, these societies became known as “Sociétés Agrées Guerre” (War-Approved Societies).

The First Societies: Gymnastics Rather than Sport

The “Sociétés Agrées Guerre” were not all created over the same period of time. The speed of their formation depended on the colonies. Society law for overseas territories was particularly reticent, but the older colonies had a more flexible system. The first societies were fencing clubs, racing clubs, or military units. The “Jockey Club,” Réunion’s first official society, was created on August 9, 1843, followed by the “Racing Society.” The Articles of Associations of the latter were published on August 17, 1849, in the *Journal du Commerce* (Commercial Gazette). The first public fencing club was created by one Roger Picaud of Saint Denis. Archery enthusiasts organized the “Francs-tireurs de Bourbon” (The Archers of Bourbon) in 1869. Leconte de Lisle High School gymnastic teachers opened arms rooms in St. Denis and contributed to the creation of fencing clubs. Likewise, several arms rooms were opened in Algeria—the first one in Algiers in 1882. Other sports, such as shooting, boxing, stick-fighting, French boxing, and gymnastics, were progressively introduced.

In 1895 Réunion Island saw the creation of the first major sports club in Saint Denis, the “Sport-Club Bourbonnais,” with some fifty members. Sport became more popular than gymnastics; the idea was now to “develop the taste for cycling and all forms of general physical exercise and to promote its progress.” Practiced mainly by a very mundane colonial elite, sport was accompanied by cultural distractions and festivities, in which women were particularly active in organizing lawn tennis, golf, and horse-riding gatherings. The Sport-Club Bourbonnais offered cycling, fencing, lawn-tennis, croquet, bowling, athletics, and football. Indeed many colonists praised the benefits of sport in fighting against the harmful effects of the “colonial blues.” In order to avoid “the danger of pubs and brothels, the two real plagues of colonies and its male inhabitants,” a journalist of AOF [French West Africa] advised young men to practice “sand-bag punching or fencing” rather than “lose their shirts at gambling or drinking their nights away in pubs.” The sports club was the epitome of social life for colonial elites.28

Madagascar’s Antananarivo Sports Club, opened in 189729 by Jean Paoli, an officer of the Galliéni troops, became a meeting place for the European elite. It catered exclusively to Europeans, and new members had to be introduced by existing members. General Joseph Galliéni invested much of his time and energy there, encouraging gymnastics, shooting, fencing, horse riding, lawn tennis, and cycling. In AOF30 Europeans, who were keen on sport, attempted to recreate structures identical to those which existed in mainland France. The UAST (Artistic, Sporting and Archery Union), created in Conakry in 1905, offered its members not only cultural activities but also archery, tennis, croquet, cycling, athletics,
soccer, and rugby. In Dakar, the UASD (Dakar Sporting and Artistic Union) and the UTD (Dakar Union of Archers), both organized in 1913, offered similar activities.

The “sporting breakthrough,” based on elitist concepts, resonated with the Europeans who ran the colony: administrators and civil servants, soldiers, shopkeepers, and businessmen; conversely, most gymnastics clubs thrived thanks to state or privately employed gymnastics teachers and trainers recruited from the local population. Gymnastics clubs pursued mainly political aims, both patriotic and conscription-oriented, as the symbolism of their names attested. In Algeria and Tunisia prior to 1914, clubs such as “Pro Patria,” “The Gauls,” “The Awakening,” “Hope,” “The Patriot,” “The Future of France” had equally significant mottoes: “Homeland,” “Progress,” “Honour, Courage, Discipline,” “Homeland, Duty, Courage.” Algeria and Tunisia were the avant-garde of the gymnastics movement in the French colonies. Following the formation of Algeria’s oldest gymnastics club in 1882, Algeria boasted twenty-six clubs with a total of 4,598 members by 1896.

At the same time, archery clubs also flourished.

One of the key events on these gymnastic clubs’ calendars was the “Public Show,” the highlights of which were gymnastic displays, military exercises, and other parades, as well as sporting competitions. The program of the 22nd Federal Meeting of Gymnastics Clubs, held in Algiers in 1896, reflected the national project. Three thousand gymnasts participated in the main display, attended by Emile Combes, the Minister for Public Education, Arts, and Religious Affairs. The French Republic thus demonstrated its cohesion, organization, and values.

At the outbreak of the First World War, when the French Empire was still being built, some observers questioned its effectiveness in a time of crisis. Its military and physical training was put to the test, and the colonies responded beyond expectations by providing over 650,000 soldiers for the war effort along with 200,000 laborers from North Africa, Indochina, and Madagascar, who worked in the factories and construction sites of France.

In the face of pacifist movements and demographic changes in France after the “Great War,” the answer seemed to lie with the colonies. The troops’ engagement helped to reinforce the idea that human capital was the colonies’ primary resource and the Minister of Colonies, Albert Sarraut, was quick to underline the need to “produce blacks.” Thus, far from seeing its influence wane, the colonies’ military power maintained their predilection for physical activity until the eve of the Second World War.

Diversification and Appropriation of Sport in the Colonies (late 1920s-1939)

Despite the preponderant military influence on colonial physical activity, gymnastics declined during the interwar years, as more diverse sports emerged and prospered. Sports clubs multiplied in spite of strict controls placed on them by colonial administrators obsessed with the risk of political subversion. Different players from rival institutions (e.g., garrisons, religious groups, or nondenominational republican schools) used the appeal of sport to attract young people.

Colonial Administration and Club Regulation

Colonial governors and administrators were convinced of the importance of promoting physical exercise among the colonized population, for patriotic, health, economic, and “civilizing” purposes as long as such activities remained limited to barracks and schools.
The proliferation of non-military sports clubs increasingly concerned colonial administrators. Within the colonies, political vigilance remained the order of the day. Club regulation was adapted to the customs and legislation in the various territories to which it applied. The number and content of the texts bear witness to the colonizers’ fears that their authority would be undermined. In the “old colonies” of Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana, and Réunion where republican values held sway, freedom of association was proclaimed without restrictions, save for some delays caused by cablegram delivery. In Réunion, for instance, new legislation was adopted in 1908. But in more recently colonized territories, such as Madagascar (colonized in 1896) or the large territory of French West Africa, freedom of association was not granted; instead, permanent controls were applied to prevent the formation of any group likely to pose a threat to public order.

In Madagascar, like many other territories, clubs were subject to legislation that had previously been passed for French colonies, in this case the act of April 10–11, 1834. This legislation principally reenacted the following provisions of Article 291 of the 1810 Criminal Code:

No association of over 20 persons, meeting daily or on specific days for religious, literary, political or other purposes, may be formed without the approval of the government, in accordance with any conditions that the public authorities may see fit to impose. The aforementioned number of persons shall not include those dwelling at the address where the association meets. Government authorization may be withdrawn at any time.

Refusal to comply with these provisions would clearly incur the sanctions laid out in Criminal Code Articles 292 and 294, as reenacted by act of April 10–11, 1834 (in particular Articles 2 and 3). The provisions relating to setting up of clubs within schools stipulated that members of the board of directors must only be French citizens. However, in light of the rapid expansion of such clubs, administrators were sometimes overwhelmed. The governor general, Hubert Garbit, thought it necessary to regulate “authorized native clubs or societies” by controlling their activities with strengthened club regulations. For example, the order “regulating the organization of authorized native clubs” enacted in Antananarivo on January 9, 1916, stated:

No authorized native club or society may meet for any purpose whatsoever, without the written authorization of the administrator of the relevant province. Such authorization will be granted where a request has been made by three of the club’s committee members, detailing the exact purpose, date and place of the meeting, and specifying the points to be raised therein. The Administrator of the Province may, should he judge it necessary, appoint a representative of the administration to attend the meetings.

Colonial authorities feared that sports clubs might provide a cover for political or religious activities. In Africa, for example, Islam was seen as the only resisting force to French expansion; as a result, religious groups were closely monitored for fear that they would infiltrate sports clubs. In 1923, a General Claudel, chief commander of troops stationed in French West Africa, was of the opinion that “it [was] vital that clubs should not have exclusively Muslim membership.”

In Algeria, a rise in the number of incidents during matches and around sports grounds led the general government to publish two separate orders, the first in 1928 and the sec-
ond in 1936, requiring Algerian clubs with exclusively Muslim members to admit at least three Europeans in order to avoid ethnic confrontations. These clubs, whose names included the terms \textit{entente} or \textit{union} (such as the “Entente franco-musulmane Burdéeenne”[Burda Franco-Muslim Entente] and the “Union sportive franco-musulmane blidéenne”[Blida Franco-Muslim Sportive Union]), promoted Franco-Muslim cultural integration.

Rules governing competitions also applied to colonial sporting bodies, which made sure that no sporting contest opposed the colonizers and the colonized. In Madagascar, for instance, the federation governing team sports split championship play into two pools, a “European pool,” and a “native pool.” In 1935, the lieutenant-governor of Niger spoke out against football matches, even friendly ones, between French and native teams. Sporting events involving colonized peoples from different regions were given some consideration. In 1930 Joinville instructors published a textbook on physical education in the colonies in which they recommended “that races be separated . . . lest jealousies arise likely to cause unfortunate incidents.” Despite such legislative regulation, administrative control, and institutional vigilance, sports clubs and competitions flourished in French colonies during the interwar years. Young people in the colonies were seen as key pawns by many groups, such as religious congregations.

Religious Congregations

Religious congregations, both those which pre-dated colonization and those contemporaneous with it, were based on a doctrine of evangelization and thus contributed to the “civilizing process” carried out in French colonies. Protestants as well as Catholics considered schooling important because young people were particularly vital to target in order to prepare a new generation “capable of appreciating the value of salvation through the Gospel.” Despite their initial suspicions of sport, missionaries quickly realized the appeal it held for younger generations and saw it as a means of bringing them closer to their church.

At the Collège St Michel at Antananarivo, Jesuits contributed greatly to the development of physical activities in Madagascar. With gymnastics followed by sports and then scouting, they created a powerful Catholic sporting movement affiliated with state organizations. “L’étoile Saint-Michel” (Saint-Michel Star), the first gymnastics club at the Collège St Michel, was formed in 1912. Through the club structure, gymnasts were able to discover the value of working as a real team unit; a necessary development for both for teachers and former pupils. When former pupils petitioned the governor general for official recognition in 1910, they were rejected. They had to wait for more than a decade before Governor General Garbit authorized the creation of the Association of Former Pupils of St Michel, by his order of July 25, 1921. Gymnastics, thus, became a catalyst of unity, and even of unification, because of its emphasis on collective development. Gymnastics, along with community spirit, new ideas about national identity, and political demands were seen as representative of the school. Malagasy pupils thus transformed the “patriotic project.” In Madagascar throughout the twentieth century, the political movement
for national emancipation went hand-in-hand with the complete reliance on Catholic and Protestant congregations to educate and train the elite who would lead the charge for decolonization.

In Algeria Cardinal Charles Martial Lavigerie clearly played a key role in the project aimed at turning the colony into the cradle of a second France in order to link North and Central Africa and create a homeland of Christian peoples. Appointed Archbishop of Algiers in 1867 and placed in charge of evangelizing native populations in 1884, Lavigerie, realizing that children were an excellent means of reaching families, instructed priests to include sporting activities or scouting in their youth clubs. In 1868 he founded the Society of White Fathers that reached out to the indigenous populace with medical care and childhood education. The Society’s initial goal was to create a climate of trust and then let events take their natural course. Sport was used as a means of gaining the trust of young people. Setting up sports clubs next to dispensaries and schools led to daily contact with young Muslims. “In order to bring the young people to the altar, you just need to bring them to the sports grounds. He who does not take communion shall not play,” became one of the commandments of youth clubs. Under the leadership of French clerics, sporting societies and clubs were established in the southern Sahara, namely “La Vie au Grand Air” (Open Air Life) in Geryville, created on December 6, 1936, and “L’Etoile du Sud” (Southern Star), founded on September 25, 1939. In Laghouat, a territory of Ghardaïa, the “Union sportive et de préparation militaire de Laghouat” (Laghouat Union of Sport and Military Training) was formed, as was the “Société Sportive Saharienne” (Saharan Sports Society) which came into being in August of 1938 and presided over by a Reverend Father Lethielleux of the White Fathers. In a 1946 colonial propaganda film, Algérie, terre de champions (Algeria, Land of Champions), the role of sports is quite remarkable, and the footage bears witness to the considerable presence of clerics. In the burning sands near the Sahara, a football match is played out between two teams composed of unusual bare-footed players attired in their séroual, some wearing the fez, others the characteristic North African scarf, who run around the pitch lifting the skirts of their gandoura.

It was usually the Catholics who promoted women’s sport. Within the strict limits of youth clubs, women’s physical activity was tolerated as long as it was practiced out of sight and was restricted to forms of exercise in keeping with “feminine nature” and the “child-bearing function.” Under the direction of Catholics, there was a real wave of women’s sporting clubs in Algeria. With evocative names of flowers, birds, and insects, the clubs, like those found in mainland France, generally tried to “build strong, morally and physically healthy Frenchwomen, able to set up homes and families or to distinguish themselves socially within their milieu, in accordance with their specific destiny.” The implantation of women’s youth clubs began with the founding of “Les Libellules de la Redoute” (La Redoute Dragonflies), in Birmandreis in 1926, “Les Mouettes Oranaises” (The Oran Gulls) in Oran in 1938, and “Les Abeilles” (The Bees) also known as “Ruche Sportive des PTT” (Post Office Sporting Beehive). These women’s physical and athletic training clubs, though not officially reserved for European and French women, did not attract young Muslim women because of their position within Islam, which was in contradiction to the new culture of the body. While the aim of assimilation was not achieved among the Muslim in Algeria, it, nonetheless, remained the chief motivation behind the promotion of scouting by Catholics in French colonies.
Philippe Gastaud, historian of colonial youth associations, has shown how the French Girl Guides movement emerged in Guadeloupe after 1936, following the Scouts and Catholic youth clubs. The Catholic hierarchy in Guadeloupe set up guiding in order to appeal to girls and to imbue them with Catholic and French ideals. The first guide company and a scouting pack were created in the parish of Le Moule in 1936, at the behest of a parish priest named Durand. The pack remained the only one of its kind in the colony until 1941 when the parish of St-Pierre et St-Paul in Pointe-à-Pitre organized another, which became the largest in the archipelago with membership exceeding 150 between 1960 and 1962. Scouting thus functioned as a social watchdog, as did the Christian schools, which allowed for the monitoring of children, and, more importantly, the way they were brought up within families.

While this overview has focused on Catholic churches because they were more deeply rooted in French colonies, the role of Protestant churches should not be overlooked, as they were very active in teaching, including physical activity in education from an early date. It thus becomes obvious that clerics, keenly aware of the attractions of sport for colonized populations, used such activities to win trust and to evangelize. Sport was a means to an end.

Furthermore, political exploitation of sporting activities varied according to their perception by ecclesiastic authorities, either reinforcing assimilation policies pursued by the colonizers or promoting the expression of local independence movements. Without a doubt, the rise of religious sporting movements should be analyzed through the lens of secular activity.

Schools, Teachers, and Secularism

The dissymmetrical relationship between colonizer and colonized generated the overuse of power as well as many frustrations. A key issue among colonized peoples was “citizenship.” Recognition of citizenship meant gaining equality as defined in the French Constitution. Since the abolition of slavery in 1848, people in the “old colonies” had based their hopes on the values laid down by the Third Republic. Though they were less convinced in other territories, local elites, trained in French school ideology, still granted credence to a model of society that had promoted them. The expectations of local elites in a fairer society focused on access to state schools under the Republic. They transferred overseas the secular ideology supported by socialists. Faith in the benefits of education was unbending because education was supposed to create a better society. This concept, advanced by the “Ligue de l’Enseignement” (Education League) in mainland France, was about promoting “total education” of both mind and body. Such education, however, did not stop at school. It continued through clubs and associations. Education also was inseparable from secularism. Secularism not only asserts that the state and schools are impartial with regard to religion, but “it is also a concept, a system of values and a militant ideology inspired by rationalism.” As a vector of progress, sports education nurtured in young people the values of hard work, perseverance, solidarity, and responsibility. Through sport, young colonized people took destiny in their hands and found a path to emancipation.

The interwar years at Réunion Island exemplify the militant commitment of Creole primary school teachers that reached a high point under the Popular Front. Sport advocates
were modernist, Anglophile schoolteachers. Beyond their teaching duties, such primary school teachers as Eugène Dutremblay Agénor, Simon Lucas, Benjamin Hoareau, and Raymond Mondon, engaged in club activities. They founded sports societies at their schools: “La Champ-bornoise” (Champ-Borne Club), “La Tamponnaise” (Tampon Club), “La Réunion” (Réunion Club), and “La Saint-Louisienne” (St Louis Club). The names of the entities clearly reflected local roots. They attempted to organize sport on a broader basis by participating in the creation of the “Fédération Sportive Réunionnaise” (Réunion Island Sport Federation) and in promoting it by initiating specialized print media on sport. There again, sport was a way to defend Republican values in order to promote the ambitious political project of overturning the colonial order.

A similar, if more discreet, process supported by newspapers and magazines was noticeable in the Caribbean colonies. As the sport historian Jacques Dumont explains, sport is related to social commitment. The belief in sport that these promoters, namely schoolteachers and journalists, shared must not be disconnected from the commitment to associations and mutual societies where the influence of socialism and freemasonry was crucial in this regard. In Guadeloupe, however, clubs and associations refrained from expressing their commitment in the political arena. Neutrality was clearly stated in their regulations and regularly asserted. Politics was generally regarded with scorn, or at best with mistrust. While they voiced their independence from all partisan positions, the sportsman or sportswoman was necessarily part of society, someone concerned by whatever affected the citizen. For Elizabeth Ferries, president of the “Club Colonial” and chief editor of Le Sportif, the local newspaper, sport was inconceivable without intellectual, moral, and citizen education.

Citizen claims were asserted in the aftermath of the Second World War in a rising tide of independence movements. Sport historian Nicolas Bancel notes the modernistic, emancipation-oriented dimension in the scout movement in the AOF and its involvement in the political processes that led to independence. The first generation of people who had gone to school and were inspired by the principles of social and political change within the AOF and in the colonies willingly entrusted their children to the movement. Its instructors included primary school teachers trained in the William Ponty French School. The school’s ethos was fed with the same paradigms: the school is a place of emancipation and social promotion, and it must be open to one and all. The message and practices of the scouts were based on similar statements. Primary (state) school teachers, therefore, formed the core of scouting movements. The scouts were part of this “second culturally assimilated urban generation” that had been through school and became involved in AOF political developments, first in the renovated Union Française and later in independence causes.

Sports as practiced in state schools in the colonies must be seen in the context of more explicit political issues. As we have shown, the members of these movements very often combined their affiliation to a political party (Socialist or Communist), commitment to a trade union, club, or association work, or membership in leagues (e.g., the Human and Citizen Rights League), or in a Free Masons’ Lodge.

Sport Triggered Repulsion and Later Enthusiasm amongst Colonized Peoples

Colonized peoples are loath to take to sports under their colonial powers because in most regions physical exertion and use of the body are an integral part of the daily customs,
rituals, and festivities of local inhabitants. Colonized peoples very often regard these manifestations with surprise and detachment.

In the AOF, dugout racing along the coast (in Senegal, Dahomey, the Ivory Coast, Guinea, and the river regions) as well as wrestling in rural areas are traditionally practiced by Africans. In Madagascar, combat sports between men (see above) or between men and zebus are time-honored traditions. The different regional varieties of wrestling such as ambia (central, south and southeast), moraingy (south, southwest, west, northwest and north), komondry (south), and diamanga (highlands) reflect the wide diversity of cultures and ethnic groups of the island. The tradition of moring, a form of ritual combat imported by former slaves and Malagasy emigrants, continues on Réunion Island, in Madagascar, and along the African coasts. Danmyé, with its very similar body movements, is an age-old practice that Africans brought to Martinique. Similar forms of wrestling can be found in the Pacific archipelagos. In Indochina, traditional wrestling, or danh vật involving the technique of miêng and meo which was a specific form of settling scores, was widespread throughout the region before colonization. Wrestlers within associations called dô vật represented their villages in inter-regional tournaments. Wrestling in these societies is not primarily intended to exhibit physical valor or achievement; rather it has a religious, social, and political function.

In Polynesia and the Pacific more generally, dugouts, in which local peoples crossed the ocean to conquer new territories, led inhabitants on one side of their islands to establish and later maintain contacts and trade links with groups on other side of their islands or on neighboring islands. Very probably, Polynesians developed advanced maritime techniques through maritime parades and maneuvers in war dugouts. In all these regions without exception, dancing is associated with different festivities.
As a general rule, French colonization, despite its policy of assimilation, did not dare to undermine the culturing foundation of these ancestral practices. Aware of the social impact of these customs and beliefs, French colonial powers took the precaution of tolerating them and even found in them ways to tightly control local peoples. In most colonies, the administrators used regional practices to gain the support of local inhabitants as well as to contain and rally them to celebrate very French festivities. Dugout races were regularly organized for the 14th of July celebrations in Dakar, Porto-Novo, and Conakry. Wrestling became more European: in Dakar as contests were held in enclosed, terraced arenas where spectators had to pay an entrance fee. In districts on the island of Tahiti, parades of dugouts were progressively introduced after the French Protectorate was established.

In the colonizers’ eyes, these activities were merely expressions of local folklore. Any local practices with a military purpose were censured. In 1918, triennial, literary, and military contests were discontinued in Indochina. Sessions of đấu quyên (boxing), đấu côn (stick exercise), and đấu kiêm (sword handling) were officially abolished. In the old colonies dominated by the intangible principle of assimilation, local practices were even less tolerated. On Réunion Island and Martinique, respectively, moring⁶⁹ and danmyé that recorded the era of slavery, were prohibited along with the Creole language and African style dances. These activities that were highly popular among the local people continued in clandestine circles and survived colonization.

Moreover, the patriotic scheme to provide physical and military training actually generated little support. In almost all French colonies, local people expressed their aversion toward physical education and military training, as reflected in the slackness and high absenteeism among locals. In reality, religious, cultural, and political concerns explain their rejection of gymnastic sessions and military training.
Islam in North Africa, strongly rooted in AOF in the Senegal, Guinea, Niger and to a lesser degree in Sudan, severely restricted physical activities. Although the Koran does not explicitly condemn body culture, religious leaders advised the faithful to refrain from physical education. Social norms within African communities imposed further constraints. The introduction of physical education and sports faced many obstacles in Buddhist and Confucian cultures, where body movements and exertion especially in public, are regarded as marks of ill-breeding. In addition, the systematic disparagement of the Vietnamese body, as scrutinized by the colonial eye, left traumas. In the AOF and Madagascar, the locals, marked by the memory of forced induction in the First World War, were reluctant to partake in any activity that remotely resembled military training supervised by the army. Rejection of such physical practices was a form of passive resistance to European cultural hegemony.

Conversely, the early interest of certain Indochinese in physical and moral training through sport is notable. On December 21, 1919, the first college of physical education (Truong The Duc) in Indochina was opened in Hanoi by Nguyen Qui Toan and Trinh Van Hoi. The humiliation and feeling of inferiority towards the white race is thought to have originated this education project. Physical education was regarded as part of civilization and national power, and these promoters intended to learn from it and to apply the lessons to their native country.

The practice of sports, regarded as more motivating than physical education by all colonized peoples, sparked a craze at the end of the 1920s. With the advent of sports, especially after the First World War, spectator sports began to grow in popularity. People openly expressed interest in horse races, cycle races, and other major sports events. Disdainful
of athletics described by sports officials as the basis of sport, colonized peoples literally yielded to the appeal of ball games, especially association football,\textsuperscript{72} so much so that at the end of the 1930s, owing to their dislike for gymnastics and military education, multisport societies only played football, much to the despair of colonial administrators.

**The Vichy Regime and the Recruitment of Colonial Youth (1940-1945)**

From July of 1940, the “doctrine of national revolution” sought to physically and morally revive France, reintroduce rankings, shape its youth through discipline and action, and ban bookish culture. With the appointment of Jean Borotra as Commissioner of General and Sports Education (EGS),\textsuperscript{73} a project to indoctrinate, train, and supervise young people was set up on August 7, 1940. Contrary to previous governments,\textsuperscript{74} the Vichy regime took legislative, structural, and financial measures along these lines.\textsuperscript{75}

The Vichy regime did not intend to confine the renovation and/or regeneration of the French race through youth to half occupied mainland France but to unite all young people behind it through the colonial empire. The administration regarded the empire\textsuperscript{76} as one of the last “cards” of occupied France.\textsuperscript{77} Provided it could be preserved from the alleged desires of “British imperialism” and “the criminal attempts on the part of dissidents,” it represented the nation’s final defense in the event of total occupation of mainland France:

> The Vichy Regime did not therefore loose [sic] interest in its colonies; quite the contrary. . . . On its own initiative and without any outside pressure, Vichy projected its ideology among all loyal colonies between 1940 and 1944. Vichy wittingly conveyed overseas a “pure” form of its ultra-conservative national revolution.\textsuperscript{78}

Despite very brief action in a number of colonies—Madagascar and Réunion Island were liberated at the end of 1942—the mobilization of the empire’s youth was widespread. Roughly speaking, the national project was noticeably adapted at two levels with a partition between the “old colonies” fundamentally attached to Republican values and traditions and which resisted in various forms, and the other territories that facilitated the indoctrination of youth. In this general context, Indochina, subject to Japanese propaganda since 1940, was surprisingly active. The Vichy period, inappropriately called a “historical parenthesis,” seems to have been all the more crucial in the colonies. In comparison with the relative lack of interest of the Third Republic in that field, it laid the groundwork for later sports policies in the colonies.

**The “Old Colonies”**

Among the “old colonies,” Réunion Island, under the Aubert governorate, epitomized this climate of passive resistance to the Vichy Regime and its dictates. It has been observed in a previous article\textsuperscript{79} the effort of Réunion Island to attract the youth, as reflected in its legislation, institutions, and especially propaganda. Réunion Island youth, however, did not heed the call. There were many reasons for this response: initial scarcity of clubs and infrastructures, atrocious health and diet among the local population, active and passive resistance among promoters of sports associations who championed assimilationist causes, the widespread indifference of local people to the “co-opting of bodies,” and the short duration of the regime. There was a wide gap between intentions
and achievements. The lack of realism of Maréchal Pétain’s policies clearly appeared in the colony of Réunion. Inaugurated on September 16, 1941, and controlled by Governor Pierre Aubert, the “Department of General Education and Sports” proved incapable of applying the new physical education program. In addition to the population’s lack of enthusiasm, the lack of sports facilities was a major obstacle. The numerous letters from governor to the island’s mayors produced no effect. Pursuing the “chantiers de jeunesse” (youth camps), instructions for setting unemployed youths to work in national interest labor crews arrived in Réunion on January 17, 1941. Lacking staff and members, the youth camps never came into being.

The inhabitants of Guadeloupe, deprived of citizen’s status between 1940 and 1943, resented the Vichy regime as an encroachment upon their fundamental rights. Appointed in September of 1939 as commander in chief of the naval forces in the western Atlantic, Admiral Georges Robert, based in Martinique, concentrated the powers of the new regime promulgated in Guadeloupe by Governor Constant Sorin. The latter did not hesitate to conduct a bold campaign to recruit and indoctrinate young children. Schools taught religion, morality, patriotism, and physical education. The legalistic sports promoters enthusiastically embraced much-awaited reforms that aimed to structure activities, organize meetings, and develop infrastructures. The first football championship in Guadeloupe was held in 1941 with nine participating clubs. Similarly, the authorities encouraged athletics by inaugurating the first athletics championships on July 20, 1940. Competitions between islands were held frequently and increased the rivalry already rife under administrative rule. Youth events and festivals were designed to issue a message of allegiance to the regime. Unquestionably, the Catholic Church played a powerful role in this regard and took its revenge on the secular authorities that was reflected in the proliferation of a few youth groups: the inception of the “Guides de France” (French Guides) and the “Jeannettes” (Girl Scouts) in the parishes of Saint Pierre and Saint Paul in Pointe-à-Pitre, the founding of the “Jeunesse de Petit-Bourg” (Petit Bourg Youth) which brought together some sixty young girls and the youth group in the town of Gourbeyre, etc. From 1942, the pernickety control of the sports movements, the exclusion of the founding members, the problems and tensions which hampered meetings, the lack of material, and the health and diet of the local population curbed the practice while the legitimacy of the regime was increasingly challenged.

The Other Territories

In Madagascar the rift between residents and colonial administrators was connected to one man, Governor General Armand Annet. In eighteen months from his arrival in April of 1941 to November of 1942 when British troops took control of the island, Annet instituted a youth and sports policy in keeping with Maréchal Pétain’s plans. It differed from previous periods in its speed of application, efficiency, and numerous achievements.

Youth were the main lever in Annet’s project, the spearhead in the reconstruction of national unity that establishes the new order. Drawing upon teaching as well as general and sports education, this policy embraced all youth and sport sectors by controlling youth during after-school hours through the sports movement and by supporting and bolstering Catholic youth movements and creating youth camps that were based on the
model of the “Chantiers de Jeunesse” (Youth Projects) initiated in France by Scout General Jean de La Porte du Theil. However, the British seizure of Madagascar doomed Annet’s indoctrination policy and demonstrated that his policy triggered major resistance, producing a result just the opposite of the one planned. Given the unity around the French flag in a climate of more discriminatory colonial measures, sports events symbolically came to confirm the implacable opposition between European colonial settlers and Malagasies seeking independence.

Under similar processes and total allegiance to the national Revolution, Governor Pierre Boisson in the AOF became a staunch supporter of physical activity from 1940 onward. He conducted a bold and innovative sports policy right until he left; he gave the development of sports a major spur in the AOF despite very inadequate material and financial and human conditions.

Unquestionably, the departments of North Africa, where sports practices were already well-established, benefited from the concern of the Vichy regime for youth and sport. They received subsidies, material aid, and personnel. Three regional supervisor training centers were opened in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco.

However, any comparative analysis of this issue must pay special attention to Indochina, as the historian William Hoisington pointed out in 1972 that “between 1940 and 1945 Indochina became an outpost of the Petainist national revolution that was in many respects more fervent than in mainland France.” Despite the Japanese military presence there since 1940, the Vichy administration controlled daily life until March of 1945, well after the collapse of the regime in mainland France. Admiral Jean Decoux planned “to prolong . . . some fifty years apart, the line of the Governor Admirals.” According to historian Eric Jennings, the directives related to youth and sports very clearly illustrated the scale and duration of the planned reforms as well as the Vichy ideal of a “future Indochina that is indoctrinated and authoritarian.” Assisted by Captain Maurice Ducoroy, youth and sport commissioner, the governor toyed with the idea of forging a “new Indochinese” elite in the regenerated colony. Most surprisingly, the Indochinese clearly committed to this program. Some 600,000 took part in elite camps, sports leagues, or youth movements.

In Phan Thiet, located in the countryside east of Saigon, a training college for leaders was established on the model of the Uriage School. The “Ecole supérieure d’éducation physique de l’Indochine” (ESEPIC) (Indochina Higher School of Physical Education) curriculum prepared young people to become physical education instructors under the natural Hébert method. The school consisted of two departments: the ESEPIC side focused on physical training and education, while the Phan Thiet Supervisors and Instructors College shaped the character of future leaders. Its motto was: “Teach to serve trusting and rejoicing in a common ideal”; its methods based on a kind of “re-education in authentic living” encouraged future instructors to delve into their history, identity, and country so as to transmit and share this learning in their native language with their fellow countrymen.

A series of sports festivals—key propaganda tools—followed between 1941 and 1944 including the famous “Tour Cycliste d’Indochine” (Indochina Cycle Race) that aroused enormous popular success. Even more significantly, the sports infrastructure was almost
totally completed during the Vichy regime. The commissariat for EGS welcomed this progress in the Far East:

Since the armistice, our great colony in the Far East has been allocated 884 stadiums versus 120 in 1939; 116 swimming-pools versus 22; 600 instructors versus 40; 200 youth monitors versus 30. Indochina possesses 1,098 sports clubs versus 269 with 61,350 active members versus 11,385. The brief of the Commissariat Général for EGS encompasses 410,000 young people in this group of colonies.92

Today it is difficult to image the social impact of these programs on youth. However, centers that followed the Phan Thiet teaching method spread throughout Indochina. The scouts underwent a new revival, and special youth camps were designed for young girls. Certain sections of Vietnamese and Cambodian societies clearly shared Vichy’s desire to “revive and resuscitate Indochina” through methodical indoctrination. In 1941 Cambodia’s young king, Norodom Sihanouk, created a youth movement called Yuvan. Designed along the lines of Vichy’s “Compagnons de la jeunesse” (Companions of Youth), the Yuvan sought “to give the (Cambodian) people a martial soul.” It glorified “a national Khmer ideal.”93 Vichy officials contributed to shaping a young generation of Cambodians and Vietnamese who were physically fit, patriotic, and indoctrinated, preparing them, without them realizing it, for national emancipation movements which evolved around communism in the immediate postwar years.

Youth propaganda and mobilization resulted in an unprecedented spread of physical education and sports in the French colonies with the initial aim of regenerating the race to serve the national revolution. This short period was one lynchpin that spurred sports policies overseas. In a context of defiance toward a French nation weakened by defeat and collaboration, physical training and strengthening of the body henceforth also benefited colonized peoples in their march toward emancipation.

Did Sport Cement “Union Française” between 1945 and 1962?

The postwar period triggered major political and economic changes in the French colonies. The new constitution adopted on September 28, 1945, that proclaimed the “French Union” reduced the colonial regime in the wake of the Brazzaville Conference. While the “old colonies”94 introduced departmentalization under the law of March 19, 1946, the “Overseas Territories”95 became administrative divisions of the Republic with a Regional Assembly and members of Parliament. The “Territoires et Etats associés” (Associated Territories and States)96 underwent little change other than in name. They were entitled to elect members of Parliament and representatives within the organizations of the Union (Supreme Council and Assembly). Political expression was revived. However, the principle of double rule and the administrative control over the territories by the high commissioners substantially limited the power of the local authorities. Moreover, the design of an ambitious ten-year “economic and social expansion plan” backed by a new institution—the “Fonds de développement économique et social” (Economic and Social Development Fund),97 established in 1946—reflected a keen will to take these overseas regions into account. Despite the apparent generosity of the postwar revival and the more pressing claims made by nationalist forces overseas, most French politicians withstood independence aspirations and supported the intangible principle of assimilation that required
training “native” elites in the values of the Republic. The study of sport after the war highlights this issue. In the minds of its promoters, nothing changed. When practiced in an educational way, sport could act as a useful adjunct to a “full and rounded education.” Insofar as it rallies people together, sport became an ideal instrument to unite countries beset by tensions. Surely its role to help revive the “French Union” was undermined by forms of nationalism.

Unquestionably, many local and international pressures drove a wave of reforms that affected colonial sports movements. Priority lay in structuring the sports movement and realigning it within national entities. Sport in schools was promoted as a guarantee against the practice of local sports with excesses and deviations that authorities feared. The issue of sporting facilities and amenities was finally raised. The training of officials emerged in the 1950s along with the democratization of sport, driven by the craze it triggered among local people and by the limited beginnings of women’s sport.

The Shift of the Sports Movements toward “Administrative Re-colonization”?

In general, European sports leaders aspired to unity and independence but reflected a form of conservatism and unbending attachment to colonial prerogatives. Despite the call by the Algiers government on October 2, 1943, to rescind “all laws enacted as of 17 June 1940 in mainland France and in the Empire aimed at either undermining the freedom of association for sports and youth groups or to place these groups under state control or to use them for political ends,” very few statutory revisions followed in the colonies. Outside the AEF (French Equatorial Africa), where this measure was ratified on September 1, 1944, the other territories turned a deaf ear to the order. Three years later when Minister of Overseas France Marius Moutet extended Parts I and II of the Association Contract Act 1 July 1901 to the colonies under Decree 13 March 1946 and Order 12 April 1946, civil servants and sports leaders were reluctant to apply these regulations. The new legislation based on the principles of granting freedom of association for all citizens radically changed the bases upon which sport was formerly organized as well as the relationship between colonizers and colonized. In all events, one requirement in the new organization of colonial sport was that it had to be similar to the French federal system.

In Madagascar, despite suggestions of adjusting voiced by some of its members, along the lines of dissident M.A. Gafoor or the administration, the “Fédération des Sociétés de Sport Athlétique de Madagascar” (FSSAM) (Federation of Madagascar Athletic Sports Clubs), a Mecca of local sports power, withdrew its position and expressed reluctance toward any change. Only after a congress held on January 23-26, 1949, the Federation was renamed the “Union des Associations Sportives de Madagascar et Dépendances” (Union of Madagascar and Dependencies Sports Clubs) chiefly to remove any confusing terminology. The Union included one commission per sport (or league) which must theoretically report to the corresponding federations in mainland France—an opportunity for the administration to take back control, re-examine club approval, and introduce a wide-scale voting system.

A comparable approach was followed by the “Comité Fédéral Sportif” (CFS) (Federal Sports Committee) in the AOF whereby this multi-sport and centralized structure was split into single-sport leagues affiliated to their matching French sporting entities. The
secession of the football league in October of 1946 led officials of the other commissions to pursue the same route at the end of the 1940s. Two decrees dated December 16, 1949, altered the way the sports movement operated. The first decree revoked the Sports Charter of 1942, abolished the Federal Sports Committee, and established a pyramid structure similar to the system in mainland France. The second provided for the creation in each colony of a Territorial Sports Committee that would guide sports policy in the territories; it was presided over by the local education inspector.

Colonial sport leaders shared the total rejection of administration controls, bureaucratization, and partitioning. Achieving “total independence” was the rallying cry among AOF sports groups keen “to owe their existence and sound and rational functioning exclusively to their own Articles of Association.” They loudly challenged the control of public instruction by civil servants and denounced entrusting sports affairs to unqualified officials who are “totally ignorant of sport” and sometimes even hostile to these activities, regarding them as “brutal and dangerous games.” They demanded “at all levels of the hierarchy . . . not only qualified men, but dedicated sports-lovers.”

In Madagascar the sports movement, dominated by rugby and football players and mainly run by Europeans, experienced some uneasiness. Inheriting the drive of Governor Annet at the height of the Vichy regime, the FSSAM, with Robert Colas and Louis Lauseig at its head, favored a “French presence” in 1948. But Franco-Malagasy settlers, profoundly hostile to civil servants in authority whom they described as “rois fainéants” (lazy kings), felt betrayed by the 1947 rebellion and thus greeted political reforms and newcomers with open mistrust. The appointment in 1946 of a director specialist in

Soccer match in Tananarive, 1946. COURTESY OF AGENCE NATIONALE DE L’INFORMATION TARATRA, ANTANANARIVO, MADAGASCAR.
youth and sport, an inspector\textsuperscript{111} who reported to the Director of Education, reduced their own power. The French administration, however, wished to demonstrate its commitments to a social sphere with high potential. Never before had the Department of Sports seen such organization or recruitment of staff. Deputy Commissioner Connan, head of equipment, taught physical education to student teachers at Le Myre de Vilers School as well as to club assistant instructors. The commissariat allocated and controlled physical education teaching\textsuperscript{112} as provided in the postgraduate colleges of Antananarivo. It took over the complex and thorny responsibility of managing sports facilities and amenities, especially those lacking basic essentials in all the colonies except Algeria and Indochina. While the colonial capitals severely lacked sports infrastructures, the provinces had none at all. Priority had to be given to regional stadiums with a view toward organizing inter-regional meetings and hosting “propaganda teams from the mainland.” Reflecting the shortage of resources\textsuperscript{113} ascribed to the administration in mainland France, Madagascar featured many projects but very few achievements. Following newly exerted administrative control over the sports sector, the extolling of school sport and its virtues, as opposed to a form of popular sport with its alleged excesses and deviations, became a recurring feature in the overseas territories.

\textit{School Sport, the Ultimate Tool for Assimilation}

The capacity of sport as a tool for assimilation (see below) had already been turned into a leitmotif in mainland France by the Fourth Republic.\textsuperscript{114} This quality of sport took on a different dimension altogether overseas, to the extent that in the AOF the beginnings

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Mahamasina_Stadium_1946.png}
\caption{School gymnastics demonstrations in the Mahamasina Stadium, 1946. \textsc{Courtesy of Agence Nationale de l'Information Taratra, Antananarivo, Madagascar.}}
\end{figure}
of sport were accompanied by an enormous blunder. The Director of Public Education
under Pierre Boisson, Paul Mus, made the following statement upon completing his
mission with the “Comité Français de Libération Nationale” (CFLN) (French Committee
for National Liberation) in 1943:

The solution that we [strove] for in Algiers was the installation of a school and
university sports board that would control all school and university sport com-
petitions and have the power to decide which pupils or students could take part
in other sport competitions.116

In 1944, following these recommendations, the governor general adopted a policy
that “prohibit[ed] pupils from any public or private school or institution in the AOF or
Togo to take part in any sport other than in the institutional sport clubs of their institu-
tions of learning where they are regularly registered.”117

Colonial authorities were afraid ostensibly of immoral diversion, when in reality
they were afraid of the political diversion of public sport. This position and their will to
control the practice of extracurricular sport are clear in this order prohibiting pupils from
participating in public sport. This order led to a general outcry in the sporting fraternity of
the AOF that lodged a complaint against the authorities of the CFLN. The committee
finally agreed to make the rules more flexible. The order was abrogated by René Barthes
on December 17, 1946. New rules allowed pupils to belong to the club of their choice.
However, the pupils had to receive permission from the headmaster of their school in
order to take part in public competitions, and such competitions had to be limited to five
per pupil per month. The same measures were applied to school sport and its functions in
Tananarive.

It has already been indicated how early and numerous choices were made in Algeria
because of that colony’s status as field laboratory for experimenting with policies. The pre-
eminence of school sport was reaffirmed there. Furthermore, school sport was practiced
from the 1950s, at all levels, including primary schools, which mainly taught Muslim
children. The updating of the lendits118 was a pretext for impressive school events that
were meant to incarnate French-Algerian unity and brotherhood. In 1952, 530 pupils
joined the first postwar lendits that took place at the Turpin Stadium in Constantine.
Seven years later, the movement grew, thanks to the effort of André Rouet, district inspec-
tor of Youth and Sport in Constantine and inter-district delegate of the Union des Sports
de l’Enseignement Primaire (USEP) in Algeria. The lendits were showcased by a large
number of primary schools as, 3,000 children assembled in Constantine on May 31,
2,000 in Philippeville, and another 2,000 in Sétif on June 21. On the eve of the Algerian
war, schoolchildren marched in a Republican way to the Marseillaise and with a backdrop
of blue, white, and red banners.

The colonial authorities’ obsession with reinforcing Republican and French values of
sport until the end of the 1950s must be considered within the context of the democrat-
ization of the sport movement that took place in the colonies at the same time. School
sport was one of its vital forces.

Democratization and Sporting Empowerment for Colonized Populations

The 1950s undoubtedly saw the development of physical activities in French colonies
and the empowerment of various population groups through sport, especially girls.119
School sport played a decisive role in education as more and more children were sent to school in the late 1940s.

School sport was introduced in Madagascar in early 1948 under the aegis of General Commissioner Henri Rouch and much encouraged by the Director of Education. It met with great success and fulfilled its mission of “winning the vast majority of pupils to the cause of sport.” In the wake of this first experience in the Union Française, many schoolchildren took to the habit of participating in sports. Mass sporting contests, such as the “Challenge du nombre” (Challenge of the Many) cross-country race, helped to foster dedication and commitment of youth.

Bernadette Deville-Danthu gives a precise account of the booming sports scene in the AOF with figures: number of children, clubs, and competitions. Apart from Mauritania, which remained impervious to sport, and in spite of regional differences, the cause of sport seems to have been won in all the AOF territories. Of course, the craze for sport remained selective, and in spite of the administration’s repeated attempts to impose athletics, the attraction of collective sports in general, and soccer in particular, was much greater. More than half of those who participated in a sport in AOF were soccer players.

The success of large-field collective sports overseas was limited by sport authorities, but they were genuinely adopted by the local populations and functioned as identity levers. Rugby in Madagascar is a striking example. It was very poorly perceived and even hated by sport authorities because it symbolized the success of the High Plains Malagasy people, who, within a few years, fully mastered the game to the point of outplaying the Europeans at their own specialty. Through its capacity to muster up forces, to express a form of excellence, and above all to be an extraordinary pageant, rugby became a potent instrument for Malagasy nationalism. Played exclusively by the Merina elite at first, it gradually became more democratic and trickled down to the more popular districts of Tananarive, as witnessed by the creation of the Isotry team. In this manner, sports clubs became a support system for the national emancipation movement.

Empowerment of colonized populations through sport is best seen with the emergence of a sporting elite. During the inter-war period, North Africans, who had made long-distance races their specialty, won several marathons including those of the Olympic games, the “National,” and the army championships. Their names were Arbidi, Beddari, Bouali. Their supremacy was confirmed after the war with such racers as Alain Mimoun or El Mabrouk, who pursued their sporting careers in France. After the success of black American athletes in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, prospecting missions were organized in the AOF to detect “French black pearls in the bush.” In spite of the Africans’ indifference toward athletics, this selection policy made it possible to produce such athletes as M’Baye Boubecar, Ly Ousmane, Thiam Papa Gallo, Habib Thiam and Pierre Williams who won fame in university, civil, and army competitions. In the late 1950s, Abdou Seye was the best hope for French athletics. He performed at the international level and successively broke the 100 meter, 200 meter, and 400 meter records in 1959 and 1960. He used his renown to denounce colonization during competitions attended by large audiences, such as the Community Games in Tananarive in April of 1960 and at the Rome Olympics.

In spite of the paternalistic and assimilationist discourse, sport in the French colonies never became full-fledged and never reached a performance level capable of enhancing
local achievement. Its status in terms of autonomy and identity was a recurrent issue, as demonstrated by the paradox of the Union Française Games: while sports competitions against French touring teams multiplied and diversified, contests between territories themselves were non-existent, as specified by Bernadette Deville-Danthu, AOF sport historian.

All things considered, no sport competition succeeded in symbolizing in the eyes of the world the reality of the union between France and its overseas possessions. Not that projects were lacking, but there never was a resolve to provide for the means of implementing them. Obviously, epitomizing and enhancing the Union Française through sport was not a priority for the rulers of the Fourth Republic who had to cope with the financial difficulties of sport in mainland France.124

Only with the advent of the Fifth Republic and the speeding up of the decolonization process125 did the management of those games become an urgent, operational affair. The “Community Games,”126 which for the first time brought together representatives of all French overseas territories and mainland France in an extremely tense atmosphere exacerbated by nationalistic issues, was, in retrospect, totally anachronistic. Most African states as well as Madagascar had already gained independence.127 By the early 1960s, France’s colonial era had come to an end.

Over half a century, unknown physical practices, at first perceived as very strange by native populations and foreign to their cultures, had been assimilated. Through play and passion, sport reached all varieties of people. Taught by the colonizer how to practice, the colonized used sport to promote their own values, cultures, and identities. Indeed sport does not exclusively belong to a “British” cultural model, for examples found in French colonies located in the most remote and different parts of the world are evidence of this. The flexibility of sport makes it possible to be adopted everywhere. Obviously, sport performs educational functions concurrently with those carried out in schools. It teaches discipline, responsibility, and initiative. It broadens and enriches the range of traditional bodily exercises, and by transforming some of them, it plays an important role. Monopolized by the European elite, then by the colonized elite aspiring to imitate the European way of life, sport gradually percolated through the various social layers. In this respect, sport was used for either social discrimination or integration. Lastly, sport played a part in politics. In the old colonies which became departments in 1946, and, to a lesser extent, in overseas territories, it went hand-in-hand with assimilation processes. In all of the colonies that became independent, it was an instrument for political struggle and support for emancipation. It is important here to underscore the influence of some actors (servicemen, schoolteachers, journalists, missionaries, administrators) in the development of sport in the colonial world.

The status of each colony, its geographical remoteness, and cultural difference from France had a determining influence on the dissemination of sport. The duration and the pace of the adoption of sport are markers of French colonial history.  

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2John Locke, Quelques pensées sur l’éducation [Some Thoughts Concerning Education], Fr. trans. Gabriel Compayré (1695; Paris: Vrin, 1992). Locke defends the idea of the unity of man. The first line of
his work is an allusion to the famous line of Juvenal’s satire: “orandum est ut sit mens sana in corpore sano” (a healthy mind in a healthy body is the short, but complete, definition of happiness in this world. He who possesses these two virtues has nothing much left to desire).

3The French Colonial Empire was considered to be the second largest in size after the British Empire.


8Published by the Bibliothèque Universitaire et Francophone (BUF) and Nathan-SEDES in 2004.


11This definition is borrowed from Dr. Fernand Lagrange, Physiologie des exercices du corps (Paris, Alcan, 1888).

12It was headed by Battalion Colonel Louis D’Argy, a former student of Francisco Amoros. See Marcel Spivak, “Education physique, sport et nationalisme en France du Second Empire au Front populaire: un aspect original de la défense nationale” (Ph.D. dissertation, Université de Paris I, 1983).

13Quoted by Yacono, Histoire de la colonisation française, 46.


16As from 1819, physical education was institutionalized in the army.

17Le monde colonial illustré, 1933, CAOM.

18Memorandum of General Jung, commander of the AOF troops, 24 March 1928, 0520 (31), National Archives of Senegal, Dakar, Senegal (hereafter ANS), quoted by Deville–Danthu, Le sport en noir et blanc, 36.

19Ibid., 34.

20Many photographs dating from the early twentieth century bear witness of such events in Madagascar, Tonkin, and Cameroon. See Centre des Archives d’outre-mer, L’empire du Sport.

21See photo collection in L’empire du Sport.

22Voted at the instigation of Jules Ferry, Minister of Public Education.

23These debates oppose the upholders of a modern physical education inspired by the sports-oriented English model on the one hand and those in favor of a discipline-oriented, methodical, and rational gymnastics on the other hand.

Decree 30 September 1904, quoted by Benoit, Sport colonial, 239.

They were started in Paris and were suppressed in the capital in 1891. See Yvan Combeau and Evelyne Combeau-Mari, “Les politiques d’Education Physique du Conseil municipal de Paris (1878-1904),” in Sport and Education in History, eds. Gigliola Gori and Thierry Terret, Proceedings of the 9-13 July 2003, Urbino, ISHPES Congress (Sankt Augustin, Ger.: Academia Verlag, 2005), 337-343.


See Combeau-Mari, ed., Sports et loisirs dans les colonies; Le Ralliement, 8 July 1895, Réunion Island Archives, Réunion Island (hereafter ADR) [1st QUOTATION]; L’Ouest Africain Français, 15 December 1928, ANS [2nd QUOTATION].

Its creation was advertised in the Madagascar Official Gazette, 2 December 1897.

Deville-Danthu, Le sport en noir et blanc, 52.

F80 1745, Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, Aix en Provence, France (hereafter CAOM).

Annuaire des sports en Algérie, 1908, CAOM. There were twenty Algerian clubs in 1891 with 3,110 members; the number of clubs increased to thirty-four clubs in 1908.

The USGF (French Union of Gymnastics Clubs), which was founded in 1873, organized an annual federal meeting, bringing together gymnasts for a yearly report, a display, and a show including parades, marches, and team exercises. The meeting was attended by the president of the Republic from 1889 onwards.

This included both “native” and “European.” About 100,000 of those men were killed. Yacono, Histoire de la colonisation française, 59.

Albert Sarraut, La mise en valeur des colonies (Paris: Payot, 1923).

The Europeans felt that they had a mission to inculcate “progress” and its attendant philosophy throughout the most isolated regions, with a view to saving the human race. In France, colonization went hand-in-hand with a policy of bringing local populations in line with the national model. This process of assimilation, aimed at transforming indigenous peoples into Frenchmen and women, is defined as “the process by which a group of individuals, most usually a minority and/or a group of immigrants, blends into a new, larger, social framework” (Encyclopédia Universalis, 1998 ed., s.v. “assimilation”). This permitted the transformation of colonies into reservoirs of labor and of soldiers. But the process of assimilation should also be seen as expressing a desire on the part of those assimilated, answering a need for social promotion, based on the respect of the dominant group’s values (Dumont, Sport et assimilation à la Guadeloupe, 2002). This attitude of assimilation is inextricably linked with the process of acculturation, by which one group assimilates a culture other than its own.

Cf. Evelyne Combeau-Mari et al., Le mouvement associatif dans l’histoire de La Réunion (St. Denis, Fr.: Editions Graphica, 2002).

These texts are fully reproduced in a report by the General Government of Madagascar. Gouvernement général de Madagascar, 6 (7), D67, CAOM,

Article 210, Section VII, Criminal Code, 1810, France.

Gouvernement général de Madagascar, 6 (7), D67, CAOM,

General Claudel to the Governor General of French West Africa, 22 January 1923, 2G23 (82)—AOF, ANS, quoted in Deville-Danthu, Le sport en noir et blanc, 28.


L’éducation physique aux colonies (Joinville-le-Pont, Fr.: Physical Education Under-Secretary’s Office, 1930).

L’Auto (Paris), 11 March 1931.

Evelyne Combeau-Mari, “Gymnastique et association, instruments de formation des élites malgaches au collège jésuite St Michel de Tanaanarive (1906-1934),” in *Sports, éducation physique et mouvements affinitaires au XXème siècle*, ed. Pierre-Alban Lebecq (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004). The study focuses on the period from 1906 to 1934, which was characterized at lower secondary school level by primary school standard teaching, aimed only at Malagasy pupils. In 1934 a secondary European section was reopened and gradually overtook Malagasy teaching.

The administration stipulated that they had to be civil servants.

Cardinal Lavigerie, a former Professor of Ecclesiastic History at the Sorbonne (1854-1856), Bishop of Nancy in 1863, arrived in Algiers in 1867, when cholera and famine were particularly rife. The Archbishop took in up to forty orphans a day, whose number quickly reached some 1,700. An orphanage was built at Maison Carrée and, in 1869, when the problems had receded, the crowd unanimously chanted, “God is great and the Archbishop is His prophet.” It was the climax of native apostasy. Lavigerie, appointed apostolic delegate for the Sahara and the Sudan by Pope Pius IX, set up the Missionary Society of the White Fathers, for evangelical purposes, and sent missionaries out to the M’Zab tribes in Southern Algeria.

Cf. Youcef Fatès, “Algérie coloniale.”


See Deville-Danthu, *Le sport en noir et blanc*, 49.


71The colonial printed press frequently used racist language that belittled the Indochinese.

72With the exception of a few regions, rugby became a craze from the 1920s among communities living in the Highlands of Madagascar.


74In France, policy in favor of youth, sports, and leisure conducted by the Popular Front fell short of its objectives for want of time and money. However, it served as a model for subsequent administrations, in particular the Vichy regime. See Jean-Louis Gay-Lescot, *Sport et éducation sous Vichy 1940-1944* (Lyon: P.U.L., 1991), 15.


76With the exception of the territories of AEF (French Equatorial Africa), which under the impetus of the governor of Chad, Félix Eboué, a freemason, dissented and rallied alongside the Free French Forces at the end of August of 1940, all the possessions of the colonial empire joined the Vichy government.

77This is exactly what Admiral Charles René Platon declared on July 20, 1940, to governors who wanted to pursue the war: “The Maréchal has only one card left: the Empire. He wants to play it at the appropriate time. Please, do not tear it away from him!” Quoted by Charles Robert Ageron, “Vichy, les Français et l’Empire” in *Vichy et les Français*, eds. Jean-Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida (Paris: Fayard, 1992), 123.


80*Reunion Island Official Journal*, 16 September 1941.

81Correspondence, Ministry of colonies to Governor, 1941, 1M 1664, Réunion Departmental Archives, Réunion Island.

82The profile of Sorin, appointed governor on April 30, 1940, does not seem to fit that of a staunch Pétainist, at least at first sight. A declared leftist, this officer who graduated from St. Cyr pursued a colonial career; he was appointed to the West Indies by the radical Georges Mandel, Minister of Colonies. See Jennings, *Vichy sous les tropiques*, 121.


Sports policy in AOF has been extensively reviewed by Bernadette Deville-Danthu who highlights the impact of this policy conducted over three years in AOF (ninety pages of her work). See her *Le sport en noir et blanc*, 127-217.

Ibid., 128.

On these aspects see Jean-Louis Gay-Lescot, “Propagande par le sport: Vichy” in *CAOM, L’empire du sport*.

The venture was aborted at the end of 1942.


On this question we essentially rely on Eric Jennings’ *Vichy sous les tropiques*, 256-271.


Réunion, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guiana.


Indochina, North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia), AOF, AEF, and Madagascar.

This plan involved investing 785 billion CFA francs over ten years to be used for economic and social modernization.

The United Nations, founded in June of 1945, was responsible for overseeing the scope given to colonized peoples to administer their own affairs. It compelled the colonial powers to provide political, economic, and social progress and to develop instruction in the colonies henceforth called “non autonomous territories.” The European powers had to regularly report to the U.N. by supplying it with statistical and technical data. Charles-Robert Ageron, *La décolonisation française* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1991), 79.

Order dated October 2, 1943, laying down draft by-laws governing sports and youth groups, *Journal officiel de la République française*, 7 October 1943.


*Le Sportif*, 4 February 1949, Archives Nationales de Madagascar, Antananarivo, Madagascar (hereafter ANM).


Gabriel Sorano, president of the CFS Rugby Commission, to Henri Larrieu, president of the CFS Football Commission; and Dr Lavit to the Governor General of the AOF, undated, 08 (31), ANS quoted by Deville-Danthu, *Le sport en noir et blanc*, 234.


At the head of the structures of the prewar sports movements in Madagascar, these leaders maintained their office during the Vichy regime and after the 1950s.

108 In its program written in August of 1947, the “Ligue des intérêts franco-malgaches” (League of Franco-Malagasy Interests) attacked the “Rois fainéants,” i.e., representatives of civil servants appointed in Madagascar. Alain Spacensky, *Madagascar*, 96.


110 A M. Poupon was appointed Director of Sports reporting to High Commissioner Coppet. *Informations de Madagascar*, No. 1340, 29 March 1947, ANM.

111 The inspector was incumbent and a qualified physical education and sports teacher. He had received at least two year’s experience in mainland France.

112 Sport was given by qualified physical education teachers. A M. Morand was employed at the Le Myre de Vilers School, a M. Saumon at the Lycée Galliéni, a Mme. Arnaud at the Lycée Jules Ferry (for girls), and a M. Winckler at the Collège Moderne.

113 Marianne Amar shows the powerlessness of the Fourth Republic to fulfill its ambitions in physical education and sport. Policy for sports amenities and facilities and training of instructors noticeably revealed these variances. See her *Nés pour courir, Sport, pouvoirs et rebellions 1944-1958* (Grenoble, Fr.: P.U.G., 1987).

114 See ibid.

115 Paul Mus was a fervent supporter of the “new teaching methods required by the Maréchal” and was the main instigator of Boisson’s measures. He was not directly criticized by the Free French Forces. He was sent to Algiers to study a new organization of AOF teaching services under the guidance of the Commissioner of the Colonies.

116 Paul Mus to Governor General Cournarie, 14 September 1943, 0516 (31), ANS quoted by Deville-Danthu, *Le Sport en noir et blanc*, 245.


119 Except, however, in Muslim countries.

120 A.N.M. Speech by Mr. Rigou, General Secretary of OSSU, *Le Sportif*, 28 January 1949, ANM.

121 A well-known competition in mainland France.


123 *L’Auto*, 5 August 1936.

124 See ibid., 314.


126 Algeria became independent in 1962.