

The “dividual” person and the self-made wrestling star in Senegalese *lamb* (wrestling with punches)

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Abstract

In Senegal, *lamb* (wrestling with punches) is both a national sport and a popular passion. Since the 1990s, a neoliberal ethos has emerged within *lamb*, with an increasing number of wrestlers conceiving the sport as an individual business venture and embodying self-entrepreneurial attitudes. Yet, a fighter’s self is a composite relational formation: each wrestler embodies not only the collective formed around his persona but also the “invisible” forces and resources mobilized by this coalition. Through ethnographic episodes that highlight the articulation and tensions between individualized and “dividual” modes of self-making, I examine how the neoliberalization of *lamb* has produced multiple, indeterminate and often conflicting socio-cultural outcomes. From this perspective, competing evaluations of relationships, agency and the production of economic value come to the fore. This approach complicates existing scholarly accounts of the neoliberalization of sport by revealing how neoliberal logics are both reproduced and deflected through their interaction with different socio-historical forces and values.

Keywords: Senegalese wrestling, Individual, Dividual, Neoliberal subjectivity, Value.

1. Introduction

When we trained together in the Ño Far *écurie*, Sunsung was an experienced light heavyweight wrestler and a practicing Muslim of the Tijaniyya Sufi order¹. He was far from being one of the very few wrestling national celebrities, nor was he able to make a living from wrestling.

¹ This article is based on long-term “observant-participation” in one *écurie* located in Pikine, a suburb of Dakar (Senegal). Between 2008 to 2023, I spent a total of thirteen months conducting fieldwork in Dakar, including ten months training within the *écurie*. *Écurie*, French for stable, refers to the sporting associations where wrestling training takes place, and to which a wrestler must be affiliated in order to compete in official matches. By participating in wrestling training, I followed in the footsteps of scholars who have directly engaged in combat sports (Wacquant, 2000; Spencer & Sánchez García, 2013). This methodological approach accelerated the process of building relationships of trust with research participants and enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the embodied dimensions of wrestling. Nonetheless, I never assumed that my experience mirrored those of my teammates. I remain sceptical that the sensuous, emotional and conative engagement of a middle-class Italian scholar aiming to write an ethnography of *lamb* could be isomorphic with that of a working-class Senegalese wrestler striving to make a name for himself in the arena. Throughout the article, I use pseudonyms. The views expressed here are my own and do not reflect those of the institution for which I work. I thank the two anonymous reviewers of Eracle for their insightful and useful comments, as well as the editors of this special issue, Bruno Mora and Dario Nardini, for their work.

Nevertheless, he was well known in his neighbourhood, where acquaintances hailed him with the appreciatory title of *mbër* (a Wolof word meaning champion and, by extension, wrestler). In response to my question about why he became a wrestler, he said:

To be a wrestler is my destiny. It is God's decision. It was God's challenge [...]. I used to spend time at the seashore with the wrestlers. I was in the *cummu kay* [the corner] of Issa Pouye and Boy Mandione [popular wrestlers from his native neighborhood]. I was with them. I followed them when they went to the *mbappat* [wrestling without punches tournaments]; I was with them [...]. What do I want most from wrestling? For God's truth and the Prophet's grace... to help my parents, my brothers and sisters. I want a house, cars [...]. A VIP's car, Prado, do you know it? I want money, I want to help. But God is good. If you are in business, sometimes it goes bad, sometimes it goes well, but if you are in trouble you keep on believing in God" (Dakar, 11/03/2017).

Offering an Islamic reinterpretation of Weber's "spirit of capitalism", Sunsung framed his sporting career as a business venture ultimately dependent on divine will. He aspired to generate substantial income through wrestling, thereby accessing to a "material culture of success" (Rowlands, 1996), while also providing financial support to his family. Later in the interview, he compared each wrestling hold to a weapon – a skill that a wrestler must acquire and continually hone through training to succeed.

As with an increasing number of young men from economically marginalized areas globally, he aspired to achieve significant economic and social advancement through sport, despite the improbability of such outcomes (Besnier et al., 2018, p. 864). To this end, he adhered to a strict training and behavioural regimen, and actively engaged in self-promotional activities aimed at expanding his base of supporters. As other wrestlers in Senegal and sportsmen in the Global Souths do, he relied on both sporting techniques and magical-religious practices to enhance his chances of success (Ibid., p. 855 and 863). In a way, his narrative and practices align with the concept of the neoliberal subject (Gershon, 2011) – an entrepreneurial self, conceived as a bundle of skills in need of constant improvement (Urciuoli, 2008). This kind of subject works hard to constantly improve him/herself, s/he is held individually responsible for his/her failures and achievements, and uses every earthly and otherworldly mean at his/her disposal to uphold his/her confidence in a glorious future despite deep uncertainties (Besnier et al., 2018, p. 865).

Yet Sunsung affirmed at the same time that his "destiny" took shape by constantly being with the wrestlers of the neighbourhood. In speaking about his wrestling career, he stressed how his teammates, coaches, *marabouts* (magical-religious experts who work through the invisible domain to help wrestlers win their matches), parents, close friend and supporters played a crucial and an active part in his matches – as they usually do in Senegalese *lamb* (Chevé et al., 2014; Bonhomme, 2022). Before each fight he distributed *sarax* (alms and gifts) to augment the number of his supporters, to increase and elevate his persona, and enhance his chances of victory. He took *saafara* (magical concoctions that are poured on the body or drank) to absorb their powers. He tied on his arms, legs, waist and torso amulets to "armour" and strengthen his body, and to attract "invisible" allies. His conducts and narratives were predicated also on a relational, porous and partible idea of the self. I index this understanding of the self as "dividual".

The viability to extend the concept of the dividual person beyond Melanesia has been at the center of a heightened debate (Mosko, 2010 and 2015; Robbins, 2010 and 2015). Joel Robbins,

especially, was critical of Mark Mosko's interpretation of the Christian person as *dividual*. Robbins argued that this position risks erasing the ethnographic specificity of the concept and overlooks the fact that some Melanesian people explicitly emphasize the novelty of Christianity. However, he was less critical of more recent attempts to interrogate the individual/dividual nexus in order to develop a comparative framework for examining processes of self-making (see Bialecki, & Daswani 2015; Robbins, 2015). While I sometimes use these terms synonymously, in this article I prefer to speak of the *dividual* instead of the relational self. The former, in fact, better captures the mutuality of beings, porosity and exchanges that are central in the self-making processes examined. In what follows, I will focus on the relationship between the neoliberalization of *lamb* and the reshaping of the in/dividual modes of self-making (Bialecki, & Daswani 2015).

As Ilana Gershon argues, neoliberal agency presupposes an autonomous "self that is a flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manage oneself as though the self was a business" (2011, p. 537). In a neoliberal perspective, albeit the self is socially constructed, its reflexivity exists prior to social relationships, which are framed as alliances that should be based on market rationality. Like the "individual" of post-Enlightenment political and economic discourse, this self is thought as an impermeable and indivisible being "whose relations with others consists of transactions over "things", "objects", or "entities" that are categorically distinct from they who exchange them" (Mosko, 2015, p. 362). But distinct from the "secular Modern individual" and aligned with more relational-processual modes of self-making, the neoliberal subject is engaged in a continual process of becoming –whether through "personal growth", "professional advancement", "networking" etc. (Comaroff, & Comaroff, 2012).

Instead, a *dividual* is a person "constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced it", which can be imagined as a social microcosm (Strathern, 1988, p. 13). It is a permeable and partible person (Marriot, 1976) continuously re-shaped through transactions (gift exchanges) and interactions with others (human and non-human). This concept develops Mauss's foundational claim that exchange is basic to social life (Mauss, 2016 [1925]; Mosko, 2010). In line with a gift economy, here there are no clear-cut distinctions between self and other, persons and things, subjects and objects. Persons are made as composite beings through interactions and exchanges of "things" and "substances" with others. They exist in a state of continuous intersubjective becoming –giving away parts of their extended self and absorbing elements received from others in return.

Neoliberal and *dividual* selves should be understood as theoretical constructs rather than ontological realities. My aim is not to revive an essentialist opposition between non-Western and Western, or traditional and modern, conceptions of the self². As Jean and John Comaroff (2012, p. 62) note, "[n]owhere in Africa were ideas of individuality ever absent". Conversely, individualisms and *dividualisms* can be seen as different crystallizations of an underlining generative problematic through which self and other, subject and object, are produced (Bialecki,

² In a related vein, I contend that the heightened tension between individual and *dividual* aspects of self-making is not caused by the passage from a "traditional" game to a sport. Rather, it is the increasing focus on spectacularization and commercialization –more than the sportization of the practice in the 1960s – that has intensified this tension. Moreover, I argue that the opposition between "modern" and "traditional" sports is not one between structural forms or configurations – it is instead an opposition between groups of people fighting for the power to define the right ways to practice, regulate and display a sportive discipline (Brownell 2001, p. 38).

& Daswani, 2015). I employ these concepts to trace a long-standing tension at the heart of the constitution of wrestlers' subjectivities –one that has been intensified by the recent neoliberalization of *lamb*.

2. The Neoliberalization of *lamb* in Senegal

In Senegal, *lamb* is a national sport followed by millions of peoples. In crowded stadiums, wrestling matches are staged along with dances, chants and magical-religious practices. *Lamb* can be traced back to *mbappat*, ritualized events organized during the harvest time by different Senegambian groups in which wrestling matches without punches took place. In the 1920s, wrestling with punches began to be organized as a paid spectacle, and from that point onward, *lamb* gradually adopted the characteristics of a fighting exhibition. Businessmen started investing money in wrestling and established arenas; audiences began purchasing tickets to attend matches; wrestlers received a cachet (a purse) for fighting; and championship titles were introduced (Faye, 2002). From Senegal's independence (1960) on, wrestling became the Senegalese national sport and the first federation was instituted.

Between the 1990s and the 2010s, an increase in the process of marketization and mediatization of *lamb* took place (Bonhomme, 2022; Chevé et al., 2014). The implementation of the IMF-mandated structural adjustment programs brought privatizations and cuts in public spending (Diop, 2002). The privatizations opened the Senegalese market to new multinational companies, which invested in *lamb* to promote their products. Meanwhile, budget cuts restrained public employment and put an end to key State interventions in economy and agriculture. Therefore, the paths leading toward self-affirmation and adulthood for young men narrowed and changed direction (Banégas & Warnier, 20001; Diouf, 2002; Perry, 2005). The liberalization and subsequent digitalization of mass-medias enabled the emergence of newspapers, broadcasts, TV channels and websites exclusively dedicated to wrestling. The media landscape became saturated with images of individual wrestling stars stylishly dressed, driving expensive cars, dwelling in luxury villas and adored by fans. In the lead-up to major bouts, media outlets began to report impressive sums earned by fighters, with the purses for the most popular champions reaching the equivalent of 150.000 euros. In this context, as the fame and earning of wrestling stars soared, a growing number of young men from the impoverished classes began to pursue success through wrestling with punches.

In this context, a neoliberal form of subjectivity emerged in *lamb*. Entrepreneurial attitudes were not unknown among the previous generation of wrestling champions (Bonhomme, 2022). Yet it was during this time that, more and more, wrestlers started to take care of their image as a personal brand and began to think about their career as an individual business venture (Faye, 2002; Hann, 2025). Wrestlers engage in different modes of self-improvement. On the one hand, they try to enhance their reputation by presenting themselves as disciplined professionals through careful promotional work (Hann, 2025). They organize dancing and wrestling events to rally supporters, construct a public persona by crafting self-narratives, display distinctive aesthetic styles in the mass media, and proudly assert the wrestling excellence of their respective ethnicities (Hann, Chevé, & Wane, 2021). On the other hand, wrestlers engage in constant work on their

bodies. They go to magical-religious experts to increase their invisible forces. They train tirelessly to improve their fighting skills in grappling and boxing.

The emergence of a neoliberal subjectivity in *lâmb* is vividly illustrated by the career of Mohammed Ndao, who took the wrestling name Tyson and became “king of the arenas” at the turn of the millennium. Erasing his apprenticeship in Pikine’s wrestling milieu, Tyson popularized a self-made man narrative, portraying his success as the result of personal strength and determination alone. Naming his *écurie* Bul Faale (don’t care) – like the homonymous youth movement – he crafted the image of a new kind of fighter, one who was skillful both in wrestling and sport-business. In doing so, Tyson became the individualized hero of a new urban generation (Havard, 2001; Diouf, 2003).

The change was not merely quantitative but also qualitative. While individual champions were praised and remembered well before colonial times (Faye 2002), no wrestling champion before Tyson ever denied his roots in a wrestling collective – a form of belonging that was (and still is) usually proudly asserted. Moreover, during this period, supporters began to organize themselves into fan clubs and some promoters started offering wrestlers the opportunity to fight in exchange for selling a certain number of tickets. As a result, wrestlers increasingly began evaluating the size of their supporter base using a commodity logic. Despite all this, in Senegalese wrestling, relationships, persons and things are not so easily (or at least completely) commoditized.

3. Relational, porous and partible subjectivities

Wrestlers’ subjectivities are composite formations constituted of the detached parts and relationships of others (both human and not human) through processes of exchange.

Lâmb fights are collective endeavours involving wrestlers’ teammates, their allies, kin, magical-religious experts, and public figures acting as patrons. Each bout, therefore, is not merely a contest between two challengers, but rather an encounter between two collectives (Bonhomme, 2022). Each wrestler embodies the collective formed around his persona, along with the “invisible” forces and the material resources mobilized by this coalition.

Super Ziguinchor was already in his thirties by the time he finally secured a contract for a *lâmb* fight. Experienced, agile, and tactically astute, he excelled in hand-to-hand combat. Generous and deeply committed to training, he constantly supported his teammates, whether by assisting in their matches preparation or by offering advice to refine their wrestling techniques.

His own match preparation involved many people. His parents sought the help of powerful experts of the “invisible” in his native village in the southern region of Casamance. Kin and neighbours prayed for his victory and offered advice on how to manage his time more effectively and protect himself against “mystical attacks”. His brothers brought him talismans and magical concoctions. His childhood friend Babou assisted him with the “mystical preparation” and, once at the stadium, he set up his *cummu kay* – the corner where the wrestler companions gather to protect his “mystical arsenal”. Some teammates and close friends visited marabouts on his behalf, contributing money to pay for their services. His boss at the woodwork workshop, where he worked between trainings, gave him money and advice. Since his opponent was heavier than him, several heavyweights trained with him during hand-to-hand sessions in order to help him get

accustomed facing bigger opponents. Coach Tigo helped him to perfect his boxing skills. Two close friends, who were key figures of his fan club, approached local politicians, who provided money to print promotional t-shirts. The female members of the fan club organized dancing and drumming events in the neighbourhood to rally supporters and raise funds.

The expenses for organizing a wrestling match are considerable, especially for people dwelling in impoverished places such as Pikine *irregulaire* (an unplanned suburb of Dakar). He and his friends had to pay *marabouts* for their work. They had to buy the goods – such as fruits, candles, sugar, sour milk puddings, chickens and more – that *marabouts* asked them to distribute as gifts and alms. They had to provide financial support to the women of the household, who purchased the ingredients to prepare lunch for the hundreds of people gathered at his home on the day of the fight. They had to pay for renting vans to transport fans to the stadium and assist those who couldn't afford the full price of the ticket.

At the stadium, he was accompanied by teammates and coaches. Coach Tigo guided him through his warm-up. As he paraded around the stadium, teammates shielded him from stones that might have been thrown by the opponent's supporters. They also protected him from “evil eyes” (*caat yu bon*) during the moment when he had to remove the sweatshirt and acetate trousers worn over his *ngeemb* (the loincloth used for wrestling). This liminal phase –transitioning from athletic to fighting attire– is commonly regarded as a moment of heightened vulnerability. They danced the *écurie*'s choreography, stomping their feet and swinging their arms in unison as they followed the beat of the drums played by the *griots*³. Meanwhile, his fans in the stands set off fireworks and chanted joyfully to cheer them on.

After winning the match, he ran to embrace his coach and teammates. When we returned to Pikine, the beat of the drum and the scent of the freshly cooked rice with spicy meat sauce filled the air. The celebration was open to everyone in the neighbourhood and would last until late into the night. Babou, the teammates, the coaches, close friends, all of us, were congratulated for the victory. It was a collective achievement contingent on a distributed and relational agency.

In the following days, I accompanied Super Ziguinchor to thank and give something to those who had helped him: *marabouts*, friends, and family in a nearby neighbourhood. By the time we finished the rounds, his pockets were empty; the expenses for the match far exceeded the amount of his purse. If it hadn't been for the help of friends and allies, he would never have been able to cover all the costs. Nevertheless, he was proud of having been at the centre of a neighbourhood event and happy to have had the opportunity to demonstrate his courage, strength, generosity, and dedication to wrestling.

Wrestling matches involve many people, who take an active part in the fight to the point that the people involved the most can be praised for a wrestler's victory, almost as if they themselves had fought. No wrestler can hope to become a champion without acquiring “wealth in people” – that is, without building a large following.

³ *Griots* is a pidgin word used to refer to an endogamous “caste” of praise singers, genealogists, musicians and intermediaries found in the countries that once formed the Mande empire. Although the endogamy and professional specialization that historically distinguished the *niëño* (artisan castes, of which griots are a part) and *géer* (“nobles”) has become less rigid, these distinctions remain socially meaningful today. For broader discussions of griots, see Hale, 2007; for Senegal more specifically, see Irvine (1978), Panzacchi (1994), and Tang (2007).

There are at least two reasons for this. First, the promoters have to fill stadiums. Therefore, the more popular a wrestler is the more opportunities he has of being offered a fighting contract. Depending on the renown of a wrestler, he represents a smaller or bigger geographical area – in some cases arriving to comprise an entire district or town. Second, a wrestler's strength is a collective one (Bonhomme, & Gabail, 2018). In order to be allowed to participate in official competition, a wrestler must be part of a *écurie*. In *écuries* wrestlers hone their fighting abilities with the help of trainers and more experienced fighters. Consequently, through his performance during a bout, a wrestler gives evidence of the forces of his *écurie*. Moreover, each wrestling match is considered to take place both on a visible and “invisible” (Ellis, & ter Haar, 2004) or “mystical” level. Wrestlers’ “mystical” preparation directly involves their allies. Powerful *marabouts* are sought out, and sometimes even paid, through the help of parents, friends and teammates. *Marabouts* craft talismans and magical concoctions, to which different invigorating, protective and offensive powers are attributed.

Some of this “magical” materiality is commonly used to attract “invisible” forces. A prominent example is a widely used type of *senghor* – a class of “magical” cotton belts used by wrestlers. One kind of *senghor* is tied around the waist after being struck on the ground in the direction of the four cardinal points. According to my teammates, this ritual act is meant to summon “spirits of wrestling” (*rawanu lãmb*), who are believed to protect and empower the wrestler during the match. When speaking about their “mystical luggage”, wrestlers were not only able to explain the functions and use of each magical object, but also to recall the *marabout* who had given it to them and the people who took them, or went on their behalf, to the magical-religious expert. When wrestlers commented the pictures showing them before the fights, it became clear that wrestlers’ bodies were central nodes within an assemblage composed of social relations, material objects and “invisible” forces.

A few months after his second *lãmb* fight, I visited Abdul-Jabbar Jr. to interview him and his close friend Tapha (the leader of his fan club). Abdul-Jabbar Jr. was a promising young wrestler who had suffered his first defeat, after having brilliantly won his previous bout. As we belonged to the same *écurie*, I had attended both matches. Tapha and Abdul-Jabbar’s account of what happened on the day of the fight led me reinterpret two events. The first was a quarrel between Tapha and Malik –one of Abdul-Jabbar teammates and close friend. They had argued over the distribution of promotional t-shirts produced by the fan club. In hindsight, both Tapha and Abdul-Jabbar attributed the true cause of the dispute to the action of the *marabouts* working for the opponent. Unable to reach the wrestler directly, said Tapha, the *marabouts* had mobilized invisible forces to provoke discord among his companions. In doing so, they compromised some of the wrestler’s talismans, whose efficacy was contingent on harmony within the group. The second event was the fact that the car taking Abdul-Jabbar to the stadium blew a tire. This incident was interpreted as further evidence that the *marabouts* succeeded in piercing their defenses. In short, the wrestler, his entourage, the magical objects and the car were all seen as components of a collective and porous body.

A wrestler body is a partible body as well. When we met, Alioun Diouf was a wrestling coach and the son of an “*ancienne gloire*” – a former wrestling star. In his youth, he had been a very promising heavyweight, raised in a family of wrestlers. After winning and performing excellently in wrestling tournaments without punches, he lost his first two *lãmb* matches in the mid-1990s and felt ill. He

attributed both his defeats and his illness to *maraboutage* (a sorcerous attack). He accused a close relative of having collected the sand where his footprint had been imprinted and bringing it to a *marabout* out of envy for his success. Soon afterward his relative's betrayal, he began to feel unwell and was eventually unable to walk for a month.

Sorcerous attacks, in fact, can be carried out using a victim's footprints and fingerprints, nail clippings, clothing, hairs and other personal items – body excreta and intimate objects that maintain a connection to the self of which they are a part. Through these means, it is commonly believed, *marabouts* can undermine persons' wellbeing and capacity to act by affecting their *raawan* (a kind of spiritual double or invisible ally).

Moreover, wrestlers receive advice, money, food supplies, magical objects and prayers from a vast array of people, who are related to them. In return, a wrestler is expected to bring pride to the collectives that he embodies, to publicly thank the people involved through mass-media, and to share a portion of his wrestling earnings with them. In preparation for their matches, wrestlers perform *sarax* –that is, they distribute various goods as alms and gifts to others. By giving away material possessions –i.e. parts of their extended self– wrestlers receive in return *wërsëg* (good luck) and *bayre* (a force of attraction that draws people to them), thereby extending their selfhood and enhancing their chances of success. In those cases, clear-cut distinctions between subjects and objects, such as those premised on the commodity form, do not apply. Marabouts act upon wrestlers by manipulating objects related to them; and it is through the circulation of gifts and alms that a distributed, collective self is assembled.

In sum, one is dealing with relational, porous and partible subjectivities composed of people, objects and “invisible” forces. Wrestlers' selves expand and contract as they embody or lose allies, supporters, objects and invisible forces, depending on how their behavior and performances in the arena are evaluated according to values such as courage, generosity, commitment and strength. Through exchanges of gifts, money, knowledge, advices, prayers and prizes, wrestlers enhance their capacity to act as collective beings. At the same time, adversaries can introduce harmful “invisible” forces into these porous bodies by targeting detachable parts of these collective beings with sorcerous attacks, thereby undermining their capacity to act.

4. The relationship between dividual and individual modes of self-making

When the wrestling machine functions well, a relationship of mutual constitution and reinforcement is established between the individual and dividual modes of self-making. A wrestler cannot become a champion without his entourage and supporters. And a collective-self forms around the wrestler, one that he builds by relying on, and continually renewing, pre-existing affiliations (Bonhomme, 2022).

The more matches a wrestler wins, the more allies and supporters he gathers. The more supporters he assembles, the richer his purses become. The more material resources he attracts and redistributes among his allies and followers, the greater his ability to build a reputation and raise as an “individualized figure of success” (Havard, 2001).

These dynamic echoes longstanding power and prestige mechanisms in the region. Since at least the foundation of the Ghana Empire in the 8th century, the status of chiefs and notables has been

rooted in the number of their clients and followers (Diouf, 2001). In areas of low population density, “wealth in people” was crucial. Leaders had to secure the loyalty of subordinates by offering them food, shelter and gifts in exchange for the agricultural labour on the land of their patrilineage, as well as for their services and allegiances. Chiefs and notables must be perceived as righteous and generous by their followers; otherwise they risked losing them to more prodigal patrons. This mode of governance characterized the Grand Jolof state and the Wolof monarchies that emerged following its dissolution in the 15th century (Boulègue, 2013). In a sense, wrestling champions today reconfigure an ancient male code of honour in which social standing –once rooted in “noble” birth– had to be continually reinforced through acts of bravery in war and generosity toward subordinates (Ly, 1966; Searing, 2002; Iliffe, 2005). A wrestler who is not judged courageous, strong and generous enough risks losing fans and allies, thereby undermining his chances of becoming a big champion (*mbër bu mag*).

At the same time, more egalitarian and mutualistic values are also vibrant within *lamb*. In *écuries*, a rich vocabulary is employed to express this egalitarian and mutualistic ethics. One cluster of meanings is organized around the Wolof verb *bokk* (to share, to have in common). Before each fight, wrestlers from the same *écurie* gather at the house of the prospective performer and usually eat together from the same bowl. On these occasions, if someone sees a teammate looking for a spot to eat, he will probably say: “*Kaay fii, ñu bokk*” (Come here, we share). *Écuries* are frequently described metaphorically as families. A common expression used to emphasize this sense togetherness is: “*Ci écurie ben lañu, ñu bokk bay ak ñu bokk yaay*” (In the *écurie* we are one, we share father and mother). From the same root come the Wolof word for kin: *mbokk yi* (those who have in common). The word *mboolo* (togetherness, union) –used in the name of some *écuries* such as the popular Pikine Mboolo– conveys a related meaning. Specifically, *mboolo* emphasizes the act of bringing people together for a common purpose, as in the wolof maxim: “*mboolo mooy dôle*” (unity is strength). Similarly, the expression *ño far* (we are together) is often used to express solidarity and companionship, such as when a teammate responds to a wrestler who has thanked him for his help.

According to these values, *écurie* members are expected to support one another, share resources and know-how, treat one person’s problem as everyone’s concern, and view individual success as a collective achievement. In line with this ethos, coaches sometimes stress that all wrestlers are equals. For example, during a post-workout talk addressing all those who attended the afternoon training session, the assistant coach Kaa declared: “Here, there are no big and littles wrestlers: you are all equals”. Standing in front of the wrestlers seated on the ground, his face serious, he spoke firmly and loudly to make it clear that he would not show preferential treatment to well-established wrestlers, and that all were expected to train with full commitment. Even though I was still at the beginning of my fieldwork, this sentence struck me –precisely because the differences between big and little wrestlers were so evident, and not only in terms of their physical size. Established heavyweights were often treated preferentially by the coaches, and enjoyed more freedom in deciding how to train and behave. Moreover, the *chef de file* (leading wrestler) had the final say in all decisions. In fact, the *écurie* formed around him, and some even identified it with his very persona.

As my fieldwork progressed, frictions between individual and dividual modes of self-making became increasingly apparent. The neoliberalization of *lamb* has reinforced values such as self-

reliance, individual responsibility, and accumulation of personal resources –values that can conflict with those of generosity, sharing and mutuality promoted by more relational/dividual understandings of the self.

The criticisms directed at wrestling stars often bring this tension to the surface. Issa Gomis, one of the *écurie*'s coaches during my fieldwork, illustrated this dynamic clearly. A few days after a big bout, I found Issa furious with a heavyweight. He explained that during the training, the wrestler had called him father and asked him to occupy his corner in the arena. But the day after the fight, the wrestler disappeared without giving him anything. "You know, some wrestlers are greedy; they want to eat all the money", Issa commented bitterly.

The criticism of wrestling superstars who change neighbourhood after attaining success or don't help their teammates is also frequent. Tyson was a case in point. Some *pikinois* didn't forgive him for leaving Pikine after all that they did for helping him become "king of the arenas". *Écurie* are usually formed around a leading wrestler, the *chef de file*. It is his charisma and his capacity to attract material resources and redistribute them that permits to maintain the cohesion in the group and his leadership position. Yet members of the *écurie* often judge that the leading wrestler is not giving enough to them; they accuse him to be excessively individualist –overrating his personal agency and devaluating their contribution to his success.

Conversely, wrestlers can also feel burdened by constant request of financial help from family and friends. Boy Bagaya, a young light-heavyweight wrestler, was the eldest male son his family and struggled to support his aging father. Thanks to his good performances in the arena, he had begun to face higher-ranked opponents. Nevertheless, he was far from earning a living through wrestling alone. In addition to training and competing, he worked as a mason and as nightclub bouncer.

After telling me about the meager amount he had earned from his last fight, he expressed frustration over how relative reacted whenever they heard he had signed a contract. Knowing that top wrestlers could earn tens of millions of FCFA (1000 FCFA equals 1,50 euros), they didn't believe him when he said he had little or no money to give. In his words:

“BB: When you have a fight... ‘Boy Bagaya got a fight!’ The family hook up. They think you have millions, they think you have millions. They don't understand nothing.

FF: They don't?

BB: They don't. They think that because you have a fight, you've made millions. And If you try to explain to them [that your purse is small], they'll say you want to keep it all for yourself [he laughs]

FF: But everyone knows that for little wrestlers there is no money, isn't it?

BB: They don't know. In your country –I heard that, since I never being there– when you have a job, it's for you alone. But here, if you have a job, your father, your mother, your mother's aunt, your... [he laughs] Everyone's eyes are on you. If you don't share, they say: 'he's not kind'. It's hard to succeed. If I were alone... I'd keep the money from my job and become a millionaire.” (Dakar, 27/03/2017).

As anthropologists have shown, in post-colonial African cities the renegotiation of the “communitarian debt” –the obligation to repay elders and share resources within kin and social networks– in the face of new opportunities for “individualization” can be fraught and complex (Marie, 1997). Yet, interestingly, when I met Boy Bagaya again in 2023, he expressed a different

concern: that people in Dakar were becoming too much individualistic. “Everyone thinks only of themselves”, he said. “They work too much outside the home and don’t have time for family and friends”. The cost of living kept raising, new expensive commodities popped up daily, and the job market was increasingly competitive. He and his wife were both working long hours, often returning home late at night, without even enough time to eat dinner together or chat. For him, as for many others, the challenge was finding a balance between relational obligations and degree of autonomy. Achieving this equilibrium, however, required walking a thin and shrinking line.

Something similar happened in *lâmb*. From the 1990s onwards, the purses for the major fights skyrocketed. *Écuries* multiplied, as becoming a wrestling star increasingly required to be a *chef de file*. The number of aspiring champions grew exponentially, but the number of big matches decreased, as they became increasingly expensive for promoters to organize (Bonhomme 2022). As a result, the competition for securing a fight contract intensified. This dynamic further strained the delicate balance between individual ambition and mutual support. While it would be nearly impossible to quantify the number of accusations of betrayal and disputes within *écurie* over long periods of time, the widespread perception was that such tensions were increasing. During my fieldwork, for example, one coach who had recently migrated to Europe was rumored to have sold sensitive information to an opposing champion in exchange for money. Some wrestlers were suspected of using sorcery against teammates, driven by envy over their success. Others clashed over access to fight contract.

Boy Bagaya, for example, was not on good terms with Mr. Perfect. Although they were of similar size, they rarely trained together in hand-to-hand combat. Boy Bagaya complained that whenever he asked Mr. Perfect to train, he would often refuse, citing an “imaginary ache” as an excuse. He also accused Mr. Perfect of having stolen a match from him by secretly offering a better deal to a promoter who had initially approached Boy Bagaya to negotiate a contract with him.

Nevertheless, within *écuries*, the values of sharing and mutuality remain vibrant. Far from simply, or exclusively, (re)producing atomized, calculating individual or reinforcing hierarchical orders, competition does not inherently erode solidarities. Its outcomes are not predetermined; rather, they are contingent on the diverse interpretations and evaluations of the social actors involved, as well as on the broader ecology of practices in which competition is embedded (Hopkinson, & Zidarou, 2022). In *écuries*, it is also through daily hand-to-hand training that the values of *boké* acquire embodied thickness. When these competitive encounters are complemented by dancing together at the stadium, supporting one another before a fight, and sharing meals from the same bowl, the production of relational and mutualistic subjectivities is actively reinforced.

5. The (un)making of neoliberal subjectivities in wrestling

As the implementation of neoliberal ideologies threatens to commodify “human relations and the production of identity and personhood” (Gledhill, 2004, p. 340), focusing on the articulation between individual and dividual modes of self-making can prove heuristically fruitful.

Combat sports offer a kind of testing ground for exploring these issues, insofar as they dramatize and intensify some of the processes under scrutiny. In late capitalist societies, mass-mediated

representations of martial arts and combat sports have been considered particularly well suited to metaphorize the *topos* of the exceptional individual –someone endowed with unwavering will, who asserts himself against all others (Nardini, 2024, p. 163). At the same time, ethnographic studies have shown that by requiring practitioners to share the experience of exposing their bodies to controlled risks, by magnifying mimetic apprenticeship (Wacquant, 2000), and by coupling violent confrontations and attrition with mutuality and affirmation (Hopkinson 2024), sporting practices such as boxing, wrestling and martial arts –albeit in different ways depending on the socio-cultural context– serve as breeding ground for the production of relational and mutualistic subjectivities, along with a strong sense of belonging to a collective (Rennesson 2006; Beauchez, 2017; Nardini, & Scandurra 2021).

In the case at hand, the proposed analytic makes it possible to appreciate how the neoliberalization of *lamb* has produced multiple, indeterminate and often conflicting socio-cultural outcomes. This approach helps to complicate existing scholarly accounts of the neoliberalization of sport by illuminating how neoliberal logics are both reproduced and deflected through their articulation with diverse socio-historical forces and values. Far from being merely a hotbed of individualistic, calculating and self-entrepreneurial subjectivities, Senegalese *lamb* continues to provide fertile ground for mutuality, solidarity and sharing.

The spread of self-entrepreneurial attitudes threatens to undermine mutualistic values. Yet, *écurie* continue to serve as spaces for the cultivation of friendships and new forms of communal bonds. Of course, they are not utopias of reciprocity and equality. Gift-giving can reinforce hierarchies, and communitarian solidarity often comes with obligations – especially in African contexts. And yet dependency may still be preferable to abjection (Ferguson, 2006).

Although there is a strong drive to exploit relationships and concentrate resources in the hands of a few, the power of social relations remains equally strong – shaping the wrestler’s self, conjuring collective agency, sustaining redistributive mechanisms and fostering collectivist views on economic value.

While Strathern (1988) elaborated the concept of the dividual with a focus on gender, and recent studies have applied it in the context of the anthropology of religion (Mosko 2010 and 2015; Bialecki & Daswani 2015), its application to sport studies appears to offer further insights into two domains that were equally central to Mauss’s *Essai sur le don*: economics and politics. From this perspective, competing views on relationships, agency and the production of economic value are foregrounded. This, in turn, allows for a re-examination of both the constraints and the possibilities for change of the current neoliberal moment.

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