

Prevalence of Spirituality on the Mental Skills of Athletes Infatuated by Paranormal Beliefs

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ABSTRACT

This study demonstrates the presence of an existing conflict between psychological recipes and the cross-posture of traditionalist rites with Christian beliefs in the negotiation of sporting prosperity. The participants were 23 athletes, including 9 women (M ages = 23.52, SD = 5.17). Some athletes (n=12) attended a Christian church and others had no Christian beliefs (n=11). To measure mental phenomena, we used two tools, the RPBS and the OMSAT-4. The results show that there was no significant effect on psi-powers for either non-Christians or Christians ($p = .095$). However, precognition was higher for non-Christians than for Christians ($p = .071$). In contrast, higher scores reflecting greater paranormal belief among non-Christians are remarkably visible in the majority of sub-dimensions, such as Witchcraft ($p < .05$); Superstition ($p < .00001$), and Extraordinary Life Form ($p < .05$). In terms of fundamental mental skills, Christians showed significantly better scores than non-Christians in Goal Setting ($p < .00001$) and Confidence ($p = .0002$). In contrast, non-Christians scored significantly higher on commitment than Christians ($p < .00001$). However, among non-Christians, stress management and relaxation scores were significantly lower than among Christians.

Keywords: *Social Learning, Sacred Experiences, Religious Education, Paranormal, Sport, Superstition*

More roles are attributed to sports as a social activity. It is a strong factor in socialization (Barbu et al., 2020), contributing to community ties despite cultural and ethnic diversity in a group where cohesion is essential (Spaaij, 2013). It participates in the restoration of lost values such as education and religiosity (Amir & Lesmawati, 2016), in certain societal institutions such as the family. Apart from the fact that sport is defined by the psychophysical aspects (Spehnyak, 2017) and cultural values of individuals (Schwartz, 1999); it appeals above all to superstitious behaviors (Tsiamia & Bakembo, 2022; Tsiamia et al., 2023). These superstitious behaviors are strange demonstrations of traditional religion imbued with rituals colored with spirituality (Maranise, 2013). Spirituality and religiosity occupy an important place in the sporting stakes as motivating forces. These facts demonstrate that, in addition to psychophysiological,

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technical, and scientific factors in mental preparation, spirituality contributes enormously to improving an athlete's performance (Levental et al., 2021). Spirituality is defined as emotions, impressions, cognitions and behaviors that stem from a pursuit of the sacred (Hill et al., 2000). It affects the subject's physical and psychological capacities while encompassing metaphysical, moral, ascetic, subjective, existential, and social dimensions (Dewi & Hazalifah, 2019). Spirituality also refers to personal experiences whose search for a transcendent reality is not necessarily connected to an institution (Dew, 2010). However, spirituality encompasses both secular and religious perspectives whose doctrinal transmission, from one generation to the next, takes place through socialization and education (Vermeer, 2009).

Several studies have shown that the function of sport is not to focus solely on human physical activities (Roychowdhury, 2019; Liu, 2021) but, as a social practice, individuals are forced into new experiences by learning new behaviors in line with social learning theory, which states that prosocial behaviors can be taught (Milovanović et al., 2020). Sporting practice is a moment of cultural crossroads and discovery of the sacred, which also influences socialization, moral values, and spiritual beliefs of individuals (Watson & Parker, 2013). Today, sports psychology is based on an athlete-centered model of sport and exercise psychology consulting, with a greater emphasis on well-being (Roychowdhury, 2019). To achieve such a goal, the emphasis is mainly on learning athletes' mental skills when the psychologist wishes to improve physical and psychological well-being. He also focuses on moral skills, as well as emotional and spiritual aspects. In addition, many researchers combine a variety of psychological constructs to flesh out spiritual well-being (Della-Fave et al., 2003; Della-Fave & Bassi, 2000; Hollander & Acevedo, 2000; Ravizza, 2002).

These facts show that elite sport feeds insistently on objects invested with superstitious beliefs. These are the inhuman contributions that define the qualities of the sacred constituted by infinity and transcendence (Pargament, 2007). This is why traditional views focus on the physical, psychological, and social elements when athletes want to optimize their performance (Miller & Kerr, 2002). However, one of the implications of discovering the sacred is the experience of strong emotions that can be considered spiritual emotions (Büssing, 2021). By adhering to this conception, we are supposed to take into account the psychologization of ancestral traditions with their spiritual artifacts. Access to such an ideology fundamentally begins with the acceptance that there is a sanctity that would be the unconditional support of the athlete's physical abilities. Otherwise, our consciousness would have to evolve towards sacredness in the mode of mental preparation by distancing ourselves from the psychological components. This sacredness is obviously based on a diversity of beliefs about the elements of the creature (Tsiama & Bakembo, 2022). In certain regions, for example, there is an important cultural heritage bequeathed by ancestors, considered sacred by traditional religion and not to be phagocyted by religions alien to the divinities venerated for millennia on African soil (Lumanze, 2023).

It is within the religion of indigenous Africans that the stakes of diversity of beliefs are developed to negotiate any form of prosperity, including sporting glory. In practice, it's common to think of sport as a social entity where beliefs intersect. Sports players mobilize superstitious beliefs, irrational beliefs, pseudoscientific beliefs, Christian beliefs, ancestral beliefs, animist beliefs, paranormal beliefs, and religious beliefs (Mukherjee & Shaikh, 2022; Jona & Okou, 2013; Dean, 2021). Without being exhaustive, one of them deserves to be activated in the face of the threatening emotions and sense of defeat felt prematurely before any sporting competition. The picture we are presented with seems to reflect the fact

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that athletes are faced with a doctrinal universe without frontiers. This diversity of beliefs continues to make us reflexive, in the sense that religion, spirituality, and sport would constitute a prosperous alliance (Watson & Parker, 2013). It is in this respect that it should certainly be asserted that sport itself is sacred through religiosity. Since, spirituality and religiosity are interconnected in the lives of individuals (Jirásek, 2015). But, as an essential aspect of human practice, sporting spirituality refers to exceptional mental strength, and power in the face of adversity or offensive energy despite the intervention of forces opposed to self-confidence, in the athlete.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Twenty-three athletes from two urban communities volunteered to take part in this study, assessing the prevalence of paranormal beliefs in competitive sports disciplines. Competitive experience ranged from 12 months or more (novice) to 9 years (experienced), and participants represented two potential teams in the south of Brazzaville. The participants were 23 athletes, 9 women and 14 men, who had defended the commune on Congo Independence Day at the departmental level. Of these athletes, 6 played soccer, while 17 took part in the semi-marathon. Some athletes had a thread attached to their foot, neck, arm, or pelvic girdle, while others wore a paste colored red or black on the same body parts. Participants were predominantly aged between 18 and 24, with three athletes aged 26 ($M = 23.52$, $SD = 5.17$). This study included athletes attending a Christian church ($n=12$) and athletes with no Christian conviction ($n=11$).

Measuring instruments

Revised Paranormal Belief Scale (RPBS)

Belief in the paranormal was measured using the Revised Paranormal Belief Scale (RPBS) or Revised Paranormal Belief Scale (Tobacyk, 1988; Lange et al., 2000). A self-report scale developed by Tobacyk and Milford in 1983. We used the revised version (Bouvet et al., 2014). The RPBS is a self-report measure containing 26 items measuring belief in seven facets of paranormal belief: traditional religious belief (4 items: 1,8,15,22); psi powers (4 items: 2, 9, 16, 23); witchcraft (4 items: 3, 10, 17, 24); spiritualism (4 items: 5, 12, 19, 25); superstition (3 items: 4, 11, 18); extraordinary life forms (3 items: 6, 13, 20) and precognition (4 items: 7, 14, 21, 26). RPBS items are presented as statements (e.g., "I believe in God" and "black magic really exists"), which are measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Thus, final scores range from 0 to 182, with higher scores reflecting greater belief in the paranormal. In addition to producing an overall score, the RPBS can produce individual scores for each of its seven facets.

Ottawa Mental Skills Assessment Tool (OMSAT-4)

The questionnaire used in this study is (Outil d'évaluation des compétences mentales d'Ottawa "OMSAT-4"). It was adapted by Fournier, Bernier and Durand-Bush (2007) for French-speaking athletes from the English version of OMSAT-3 (Durand-Bush, Salmela and Green-Demers, 2001). The 85-item OMSAT-4 assesses twelve mental skills classified into three domains, including fundamental skills (goal setting, self-confidence, commitment); psychosomatic skills (stress response, fear control, relief, activation); and cognitive skills (concentration, distraction control, imagery, mental practice, competition planning). Scores for the 12 subscales are averages of self-ratings of 4 statements, on a 7-point Likert-type scale (strongly agree to strongly agree).

Procedure

The research design was exploratory and descriptive with two groups of athletes navigating a multipolar spirituality. The data collection procedure was carried out using two paper-and-pencil questionnaires. Subjects participated voluntarily, and were free to withdraw if they did not intend to complete the survey. Before starting the survey, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form in line with the ethical conduct for social sciences and humanities of the Université Marien Ngouabi.

Statistical analysis

First, descriptive statistics were obtained on superstitious rituals, and each of the discrete variables was presented as a percentage. Next, data analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0. Data were summarized in tables in which continuous variables were expressed as means with standard deviation. In this configuration, distributed continuous variables were compared using Student's unpaired t-test. Finally, Pearson correlations were also calculated between OMSAT-4 parameters and RPBS items, in order to analyze relationships between mental abilities and paranormal belief stakes.

RESULTS

Table 1: Paranormal belief scores among athletes, Christians and non-Christians

Components of belief paranormal	Christian athletes (n=12)	Non-Christian athletes (n=11)	Christians vs. non- Christians	
	M±SD	M±SD	t(df=21)	p
Traditional beliefs	14.08±0.22	10.55±0.24	5.21	.00001
Psi-powers	10.83±0.31	11.91±0.33	-1.3	N.S
Witchcraft	06.42±0.63	16.73±0.69	-8.97	< .05
Superstition	04.92±0.17	10.64±0.19	-9.52	< .00001
Spiritualism	12.51±0.39	09.73±0.42	3.09	< .05
Extraordinary form of life	08.83±0.35	12.55±0.38	-4.53	< .05
Precognition	11.58±0.87	13.64±0.95	-1.52	N.S

The results in Table 1 show that among Christian athletes, compared with non-Christians, higher scores reflecting greater paranormal belief were observed in two sub-dimensions, namely traditional belief (M=14.08±0.22 vs. M=10.55±0.24, with a significant result at $p < .05$), and spiritualism (M=12.51±0.39 vs. M=9.73±0.42, with a non-significant result at $p < .05$). However, there was also no significant effect, on the one hand, in psi-powers, $t(21) = -1.3$, $p = .095$, even though non-Christian athletes (M=11.91, SD=0.33) scored higher than Christian athletes (M=10.83, SD= 0.31), and on the other hand, for precognition, $t(21) = -1.52$, $p = .071$, although non-Christians (M=13.64±0.95) scored higher than Christians (M=11.58±0.87). On the other hand, higher scores reflecting greater paranormal belief among non-Christians are remarkably visible in the majority of sub-dimensions, such as Witchcraft (M=16.73±0.69 vs. M=6.42±0.63, $t(21) = -8.97$ with $p < .05$); Superstition (M=10.64±0.19 vs M= 04.92±0.17, $t(21) = -9.52$, $p < .00001$), and Extraordinary Life Form (M=12.55±0.38 vs M=08.83±0.35, $t(21) = -4.53$, $p < .05$).

Table 2: Mental ability scores for Christian and non-Christian athletes

Type of skills	Christian athletes (n=12)	Non-Christian athletes (n=11)	Christians vs. non-Christians	
	M±SD	M±SD	t (df=21)	p
Fundamentals				
Setting goals	14.58±0.39	9.45±0.42	5.71	< .05
Trust	14.51±0.55	10.09±0.61	4.12	< .05
Commitment	09.17±0.43	15.27±0.47	-6.15	< .05
Psychosomatic				
Stress management	09.08±0.37	12.91±0.41	-4.34	< .05
Fear control	08.17±0.31	7.89±0.41	0.33	N.S
Relaxation	09.05±1.18	12.27±1.29	-1.77	< .05
Activation	11.42±1.38	12.09±1.51	-0.41	N.S
Cognitives				
Concentration	13.25±0.56	11.18±0.61	1.92	< .05
Distraction control	10.67±0.73	08.45±0.79	1.79	< .05
Imaging	11.08±0.47	11.64±0.51	-0.56	N.S
Mental practice	10.08±0.54	10.73±0.58	-0.61	N.S
Competition préparation	09.08±0.36	13.09±0.41	-4.59	<.00001

Looking at Table 2, we note that the 12 Christian athletes who participated in the measurement of fundamental skills, namely goal setting (M=14.58, SD=0.39) and confidence (M=14.51, SD=0.55) compared to the 11 non-Christian athletes, respectively (M= 9.45, SD=0.42 and M=10.09, SD=0.61) demonstrated scores of significantly better, t (21) =5.71, p < .00001 and t (21) = 4.12, p= .0002. In contrast, the commitment of the 11 non-Christian athletes (M= 15.27, SD=0.47) versus the 12 Christian athletes (M=09.17, SD=0.43) showed significantly higher scores, t (21) = - 6.45, p < .00001. The 11 non-Christian athletes who participated in the psychosomatic skills measure, namely stress management (M=12.91, SD=0.41) and relaxation (M=12.27, SD=1.29) compared with the 12 Christian athletes (M=09.08±0.37; M=09.05±1.18) showed significantly higher scores, respectively, t (21) = - 4.34, p=.0001 and t (21) = - 1.77, p= .045. While there was no significant effect on the difference in means, on the one hand, for fear control between Christian and non-Christian athletes (M=7.89±0.41 vs M= 8.17, SD=0.31, NS), on the other hand, for relaxation between non-Christian and Christian athletes (M= 12.27±1.29 vs M=11.42±1.38, NS).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the relationship between the mobilization of paranormal beliefs linked to ritual practices and the place of mental skills necessary for cognitive efficiency in rural athletes. First of all, to understand the phenomenon under study, we adopted a hermeneutic approach. Indeed, an analysis based on such an approach seems to be the appropriate approach for an in-depth understanding of the complex link between sport and religion (Jirásek, 2023). Next, the interpretation of the participants' superstitious behavior was approached in terms of the transcendent reality presenting a symbolic behavior of metaphorical character defended by Cojanu (2016). For him, the sacred fact does not manifest itself exclusively in profane phenomena but in a divine reality specific to the religious person.

In addition to the fact that the sample was mainly made up of Christians (n=12) and secondarily of those who belonged to traditional ancestral religion (n=11), all participants were asked about their habitual frequentation of cosmological figures. The data reveal consultation of mediums (n=4); marabouts (n=6); fetishists (n=8); exorcists (n=2) and

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chaplains (n=3). Participants were also asked to state the nature of the sacred object they were willing to use or war for ritual practices. The results mention the use of bird feathers (n=5); animal skins (n=4); snake or boa heads (n=3); human skulls (n=5); tortoise shells (n=3); buffalo horns (n=1) or carved figures (n=2).

However, the results of this study show that the commitment to rituals was very high to trivialize the uncertainty that athletes would not have the fruit of their beliefs. If the object of ritual varies from one object to another, rituals likely vary from one part of the universe to another. These results are confirmed by the findings of previous studies mentioning that most rituals involve the natural environment (Gumo et al., 2012; Tsiana & Bakembo, 2022). The analysis shows that each athlete has learned to weave a personal relationship with an object of creation, to which he or she maintains a bond invested with spirituality. All in all, these results show that there is considerable overlap between the roles of cosmological characters and sports psychologists. Nevertheless, there are differences in approach between a sports psychologist and each of the above-mentioned characters. On the other hand, there's nothing to prevent most sports training organizations from calling on the services of these characters, on a voluntary or paid basis.

The results of this study also show that superstitious behavior is more marked among non-Christian athletes than among Christian athletes. The latter also identify with the sacrificial rituals characteristic of African traditions but distance themselves somewhat when it comes to presenting themselves as followers of the Priest or Pastor, or as faithful to the principles of the Church preaching Christ. Since the descriptive analysis of data relating to the ritual practice of athletes has shown that globally superstitious behavior is expressed by the intimate handling of culturally sacred objects, the secret consultation of cosmological figures of great renown in rural and urban communities, and the motivated visit to places of obsession in certain localities

Among non-Christian athletes (Table 1), the superstition score was 10.64 ± 0.19 (vs. 04.92 ± 0.17 among Christians), the average witchcraft score was 16.73 ± 0.69 (vs. 06.42 ± 0.63 among Christians) and the average score on extraordinary life form was 12.55 ± 0.38 (vs. 08.83 ± 0.35 among Christians). In Table 2, mean scores for basic mental skills were 10.09 ± 0.61 (vs. 14.51 ± 0.55 among Christians) for confidence and goal setting were only 9.45 ± 0.42 (vs. 14.58 ± 0.39 among Christians). These low scores show that non-Christians are tending more and more toward, the logic of animistic beliefs. The latter is seen through the prism of religion as superstition or ignorance, constituting a major obstacle to development in Africa. This model of belief is preferred by victory-seeking athletes because they believe that the living necessarily cohabitates with the invisible world. And that the world of the invisible includes powers (fetishes) and spirits (represented by ancestors). Invisibles manifest themselves in a variety of forms and can intervene to ward off bad luck in the offensive and defensive actions of opponents on the sports field. Among Christian athletes, OMSAT-4 cognitive ability scores were 13.25 ± 0.56 (vs. 11.18 ± 0.61 among non-Christians) for concentration and 10.67 ± 0.73 (vs. 08.45 ± 0.79 among non-Christians) for distraction control. While their mean scores on PBRs paranormal beliefs were 12.51 ± 0.39 for spiritualism (vs. 09.73 ± 0.42 for non-Christians) and 14.08 ± 0.22 for traditional belief (vs. 10.55 ± 0.24 for non-Christians). The significant value of high scores on these cognitive skills among Christian athletes would indicate the absence of conflict between the cognitive and the spiritual. There would probably be a significant rapprochement between spiritual identity and the practice of concentration essentially oriented towards the promises of divinity.

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On the basis of its descriptive values, it has been shown that divinity or the imaginary encounter with cultural heroes produces a positive and reassuring state of mind in a competitive environment. This would seem to engender a sense of correct stress management, while achieving better results than those disturbed by psychological stress, despite the wonderful consequences of training on irritation. Some studies have mentioned that mental training exercises can trigger an orientation toward spirituality made with ancestral beliefs (Ntombana, 2015).

Furthermore, the results reported in Table 2 show that the concentration measure offers significantly high scores for Christians ($M=13.25\pm0.56$), compared to non-Christians ($M=11.18\pm0.61$), with t -value (21) = 1.92; the p -value being 0.034 with a significant result at $p < 0.05$. Similarly, the distraction control score was shown to be significantly elevated in Christian athletes ($M=10.67$, $SD=0.73$) compared to non-Christian athletes ($M= 08.45$, $SD=0.79$), t -value (21) = - 4.59; p -value being .000079, with the result significant at $p < 0.05$. The stability and development of these parameters are evidence of proven competence in managing stress and situational anxiety. Even if, between the two groups, stress management is not carried out in the same way or with the same effort between Christian athletes ($M=09.08$, $SD=0.37$) and non-Christian athletes ($M=12.91\pm0.41$). However, the non-Christians would be technically more willing to succeed in stress management, with a statistically different difference in means ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, the practice of relaxation would be better experienced by non-Christians ($M=12.27$, $SD=1.29$) than by Christians ($M=09.05$, $SD=1.18$), with the difference in means also significantly different between the two groups of athletes ($p < 0.05$). Relaxation is a powerful technique for reducing muscle tension and negative thoughts (Parnabas et al., 2014). The results of this study show that non-Christians are more willing to reduce tension and dominate negative thoughts, and would be more likely to optimize their sports performance than Christians. This finding points to the fact that non-Christians would benefit more from focusing all their cognitive energies on amulet invocations and making sacrifices to ancestral spirits. Despite the fact that the face of religion on the African continent has been modified by the European (Nmah 2010). It would therefore seem that this model of spirituality leads to psychological traits such as self-discipline and patience despite the pressure of the sporting event, and to mixed emotional states. This does not seem to contradict with high activation ($M=12.09$, $SD=1.51$, $p = .35$, NS) and fear control (t -value = .33, $p = .37$, NS) scores obtained by non-Christian athletes.

CONCLUSION

In African sports, spirituality is the epicenter of mental preparation and is experienced differently from one culture to another. Practical experiences depend on previous socialization behaviors. Sometimes they are imbued with endogenous or exogenous beliefs, such as those imported by the colonizer. For example, a Christian ideology imported from Europe is not readily accepted by some African traditionalists and is repelled by a form of sports education linked to ancestral beliefs. The results agree that Christianity, supported by European culture, is forgotten to the detriment of beliefs inspired by the cultural environment of the athlete in search of glory.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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