

## Original Research Article

# Food and Sport as Vectors of Sociability among Senior Citizens: Between Tradition, Innovation and Isolation

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**Abstract:** This study explores the role of food and sporting activities in the construction of social ties among Ivorian seniors in Abidjan, where there is tension between cultural heritage, contemporary innovations and the risk of isolation. The aim is to analyse how these practices shape the relational dynamics of older people in a context of accelerated urbanisation and changes in family solidarity. Methodologically, a triangulated qualitative approach involves semi-directive interviews with senior citizens, ethnographic observations in sociable spaces (maquis, markets, sports clubs) and a discursive analysis of local public policies. The results reveal an ambivalence: while community meals and certain sporting practices (walking, dancing) strengthen social ties, the westernisation of diets and the reduction of meeting places undermine these dynamics. The discussion highlights the need to strike a balance between tradition and modernity to preserve intergenerational cohesion. In conclusion, maintaining social cohesion requires inclusive policies that integrate food and sports practices adapted to local realities.

**Keywords:** Food, Sport, Sociability, Seniors, Traditions, Innovations, Isolation.

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## INTRODUCTION

Observations in the field reveal a complex relationship between diet, physical activity and sociability among senior citizens in Côte d'Ivoire. Traditional community meals encourage intergenerational exchange and the maintenance of social ties. At the same time, sporting activities are emerging in semi-formal settings, notably group walking and dancing. However, these dynamics coexist with growing isolation, accentuated by urbanisation and the redefinition of family solidarity. Access to social spaces and sports facilities remains unevenly distributed across neighbourhoods and economic resources.

This observation reveals a paradox: while food and sport have historically been vehicles for socialisation, urban and nutritional transformations are tending to fragment them. On the one hand, the rise of industrialised products and the individualisation of consumption patterns are weakening collective meals. On the other, the range of sports on offer remains ill-suited to the needs of the elderly, with a mix of spontaneous popular practices and institutional models that are not easily accessible. How are these changes redefining the sociability of senior citizens in Abidjan?

The study aims to understand the social logics structuring these practices and their effects on seniors' social ties. It will look at the ways in which dietary and sporting norms are adapted, resisted or reappropriated in a context of accelerating change. The analysis will focus on the relationship between tradition and innovation, looking at inequalities of access and the new forms of sociability that are emerging around these practices.

From a scientific point of view, this research is part of a sociology of ageing in urban Africa that has as yet been little explored. It sheds light on the way in which bodily and eating practices contribute to the construction of social ties in old age. Epistemologically, it questions the relevance of globalised models of active ageing to local dynamics. In this way, it contributes to a contextualised reading of the socialisation processes of older people in a changing society.

Research by Leclercq (2007) and Lehodey (2018) highlights the importance placed on health by both individuals and society as a whole. Sport plays a central role in this concern by promoting physical fitness. Athletic training serves a variety of purposes: beyond the pursuit of performance, it encompasses recreational and

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aesthetic dimensions, as well as preventive and therapeutic functions for certain pathologies and disabilities. More broadly, sports practice is part of an approach aimed at improving well-being and quality of life, encouraging many people to visit gyms, swimming pools, or stadiums. The media, by disseminating an idealized image of a healthy body, contributes to this dynamic. We are thus observing a shift in physical fitness practices towards fitness centers. Furthermore, in the collective imagination, seniors are often perceived as isolated and marginalized. However, A-M Guillemard (1996) highlights a paradox: while some representations associate them with exclusion, studies show a continuous improvement in their standard of living, which has even exceeded that of working people (Bigot *et al.*, 2013). However, although this economic inclusion is proven, A-M Guillemard notes that seniors may have experienced a certain social marginalization. Thus, the representations associating them with exclusion are not entirely unfounded, which explains the implementation of numerous social programs in Europe aimed at preventing the loss of autonomy among retirees.

Burlot and Lefevre (2009) point out that in France, the practice of physical and sporting activities among seniors has increased significantly over the past twenty years. In 1985, 60% of people over 55 reported participating in them (Irlinger, Louveau, Metoudi, 1987), while in 2000, this rate reached 73% (Mignon, Truchot, 2000), with a trend that could continue to increase.

This trend is the result of several factors. First, the increasing proportion of seniors in the French population (Desplanques, 2005; Richet-Mastain, 2006): life expectancy now exceeds 75 years for men and 80 years for women (Pinson, 2006). Furthermore, since 2005, the "baby-boom" generation has been entering retirement (Rocheftort, 2000). If this trend continues, those over 60 will represent more than 26% of the French population in 2020, compared to 19% in 1990 and only 10% in 1900 (Insee, 1990). Furthermore, seniors have more free time, being mostly retired. The retirement age has gradually been lowered to 60, a trend accentuated by early retirement schemes encouraged by companies (Gaultier, 2003). Moreover, current retirees have been marked by a real sports culture. Having grown up in a context where sport had become more democratic, particularly through the sports federations of the 1960s, they contributed to the sharp increase in the number of licensed players, which rose from 3 to 12 million between 1960 and 1985 (Pociello, 1999). For these new retirees, sport is seen not only as a way to preserve their health and slow down aging, but also as a lever for maintaining a physical appearance in line with youthful standards (Feillet, 2000). In addition, it plays an important social role by limiting the risk of isolation that can accompany entering the "inactive" category (Pichot, 2002).

In addition, according to the Student Health Service (SSE) of the University of Paris-Saclay (2024), regular physical activity leads to an increase in protein requirements in order to promote muscle development. It also leads to a loss of carbohydrates, lipids, minerals and water, which are drawn from the body's reserves, which must be replenished continuously and naturally.

## 1. Theoretical and Methodological Foundation

The analysis of seniors' sociability through diet and exercise drew on two major sociological theories: Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus (1979) and Ulrich Beck's theory of individualization (1986). The former helped us understand how seniors' eating and exercise practices resulted from dispositions incorporated over time, influenced by their social trajectory. The latter shed light on contemporary changes in these practices, revealing the tension between the preservation of traditional habits and the adoption of new forms of sociability in a context of reflexive modernity. The application of these theories to this study had significant scientific significance, helping to explain both the persistence of certain inherited practices and the individual adjustments made in the face of social change.

However, these approaches presented epistemological limitations. Bourdieu's theory has sometimes led to a deterministic view of social practices, minimizing the ability of individuals to redefine their habits based on new dynamics. Beck's theory, for its part, has been criticized for its excessive emphasis on individualization, underestimating the importance of collective belonging and intergenerational solidarity. These limitations necessitated methodological vigilance to avoid reducing seniors' behavior to pre-established patterns, but rather to understand their sociability in a nuanced manner.

The methodology employed was part of a triangulated qualitative approach, combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis. Abidjan was chosen as the study site due to its social diversity and the coexistence of traditional and modern lifestyles, allowing for the observation of the varied forms of sociability among seniors. The group of respondents included seniors active in sports clubs, culinary associations, and isolated seniors, in order to compare different experiences of sociability. These interviews explored the motivations, representations, and transformations of social practices related to food and exercise.

The sampling was based on a purposive method, selecting participants based on age, gender, and social background to ensure a diverse range of profiles. The survey tools combined interview guides and observation diaries. The sampling technique relied on the "snowball" method to reach seniors who are less visible in formal channels. Finally, the data analysis was carried out through thematic coding, allowing us to identify the

social logic underlying the food and exercise practices of seniors and to reflect the tensions between tradition, innovation, and isolation.

## 2. RESULTS

### 2.1. The Perpetuation of Food Traditions as a Factor in Maintaining Social Connections

Food plays a central role in the sociability of seniors in Côte d'Ivoire. Group meals, particularly around traditional dishes such as attiéké or foutou, help strengthen community and family ties.

#### Empirical Example (Interview Excerpt):

*"I can't eat alone. We've always eaten together, we shared. Even when my children aren't home, I go to my neighbors' house or invite my friends from the neighborhood. It's around food that we talk about everything and that we still feel alive."*

This excerpt highlights the social function of shared meals, a fundamental aspect of human interaction analyzed by various contemporary sociologists. Drawing on the work of Richard Sennett (1998), this need for conviviality can be interpreted as a resistance to the increasing individualization of modern societies. Sennett explains that the flexibility imposed by capitalism weakens traditional social bonds, making shared spaces essential for maintaining a sense of belonging. Here, the communal meal becomes a space for sociability, allowing connections to be rebuilt in a context where community frameworks are crumbling.

In a complementary manner, Andreas Reckwitz (2017) analyzes how everyday practices, such as sharing meals, contribute to the construction of collective identities. He emphasizes that in a society marked by individualization and competition, the search for shared and ritualized experiences becomes a means of creating meaning. The shared meal thus acts as a space for mutual recognition, where individuals reconnect with forms of local solidarity in the face of contemporary social atomization.

Finally, following the perspective of Serge Paugam (2008), this practice can be interpreted through the different forms of social connection he identifies: filiation, elective participation, organicity, and citizenship. Here, the shared meal reflects a form of elective participation and organicity, consolidating close relationships. It demonstrates an attachment to community ties in the face of a society.

### 2.2. The Rise of Team Sports and Physical Activities as a New Space for Social Interaction

Senior citizens in Abidjan are increasingly investing in physical activities, such as morning walks on the beach or gymnastics clubs, which allow them to forge new social relationships.

#### Empirical Example (Interview Excerpt):

*"Before, we stayed at home, but now, with my friends, we go for a walk in Banco National Park every morning. After the walk, we sit down, have tea, and talk about life. It allowed me, as an older person, to meet people and not feel alone."*

This statement highlights the importance of public spaces and collective practices in the socialization of older individuals, echoing the analyses of Ray Oldenburg (1989). According to Oldenburg, these informal meeting spaces such as parks, cafes, and public squares play a fundamental role in building social bonds, particularly for populations vulnerable to isolation. Here, the morning walk and the tea ritual are similar to these spaces of sociability where spontaneous interactions help combat loneliness and maintain active social participation outside the home.

This dynamic also echoes the work of Richard Sennett (2012), who highlights the importance of shared rituals in strengthening human relationships. Sennett explains that repeated and ritualized interactions, such as collective walks and discussions over tea, strengthen cooperation and create forms of mutual recognition. This type of close sociability allows older individuals to redefine their social role outside the family setting, thus contributing to their psychological well-being and integration into the community.

Finally, this practice can be analyzed through the perspective of Hartmut Rosa (2016), who develops the concept of "resonance" as an antidote to modern alienation. According to Rosa, the experience of resonance emerges in social relationships and interactions with the environment when these are experienced as authentic and enriching. Walking in the park and sharing tea are moments of connection to the world and to others, which allow older people to regain a form of presence and existential continuity in the face of the transformations of contemporary society. Thus, these practices are not simple leisure activities, but true strategies for reclaiming social connections and lived time.

### 2.3. Isolation in the Face of Urban Development and Changing Lifestyles

Despite these opportunities for sociability, some seniors experience increased loneliness due to urban change and the departure of their loved ones for professional or migratory reasons.

#### Empirical Example (Interview Excerpt):

*"Before, we lived in a large family, everyone was there. Now, my children have gone to Europe, my grandchildren are always on their phones... As an elderly person, I often eat alone. Even when it comes to sports, I don't always have the energy to go. Sometimes I feel forgotten."*

This statement highlights the transformation of traditional family structures and the increased isolation of older people in contemporary societies. The work of Zygmunt Bauman (2000) offers a relevant perspective on this phenomenon. Bauman describes liquid modernity as an era characterized by the fluidity of social relationships and the erosion of stable structures, such as the extended family. In this context, geographic mobility and growing individualism are leading to the breakdown of traditional families, leaving older adults in situations of social isolation. The example of children who have left for Europe and grandchildren absorbed by their phones illustrates this dissolution of intergenerational ties, reinforcing feelings of abandonment among older adults.

Furthermore, research by Robert Putnam (2000) highlights the decline in social capital in modern societies. Putnam observes a decline in participation in community activities and a reduction in social interactions, factors essential to individual well-being. For older adults, this decline in social networks and community engagement can exacerbate feelings of loneliness, especially when they are physically frail and unable to participate in activities such as sports. Thus, the isolation of older adults is not only a consequence of family estrangement, but also of the general decline of community structures that once served as social support. Finally, the work of Lise Switsers (2021) challenges common perceptions of loneliness among older adults.

Switsers emphasizes that loneliness is not solely negative and can be experienced differently by individuals. However, she recognizes that for many, social isolation is a worrying reality that requires special attention. In the Ivorian context, where family solidarity is traditionally strong, the shift toward nuclear family structures and the migration of younger generations abroad can accentuate feelings of abandonment among older adults. It is therefore crucial to develop community initiatives and public policies to support older adults, prevent their isolation, and promote their social inclusion.

### 3. DISCUSSION

Community meals and certain sporting activities, such as walking and dancing, play a central role in strengthening social ties. These activities encourage interpersonal interaction, create spaces for conviviality and reinforce the feeling of belonging to a community. For example, walking football, an adapted version of the traditional sport, has been introduced to encourage senior citizens to remain active while maintaining social relationships. The practice offers physiological and psychological benefits to participants, while strengthening social ties within the group.

However, the westernisation of diets and the reduction of meeting places are threats to these social dynamics. The adoption of sedentary lifestyles and less balanced diets can lead to health problems such as

obesity and diabetes, requiring specific dietetic interventions. The creation of dietetic consultations carried out by professionals, financed by national solidarity, is proposed to combat these nutritional diseases. At the same time, the reduction in public spaces dedicated to meetings and collective activities is limiting opportunities for social interaction, weakening community ties. This trend can lead to increased isolation of individuals and a breakdown in the social fabric.

In the light of the results presented above, we have opted for an economy of discourse, in particular to provide exhaustive details of all the data from the analytical matrix of results. This approach is based on an epistemological choice that favours synthesis and limits the redundancies that are likely to impair the fluidity of the analysis. Our attention is therefore focused on a central theme: *"The rise of team sport and physical activities as a new space for sociability"*.

The rise of team sport and physical activity as a new social space is part of a dynamic that several contemporary sociologists have analysed from the perspective of transformations in social ties and bodily practices. Richard Giulianotti (2005) has highlighted the role of sport as an arena for social integration, emphasising that collective sporting practices have contributed to the formation of new forms of sociability structured around common rules and shared values. This analysis made it possible to interpret the results of this study by showing that involvement in team sport was not solely a quest for physical well-being, but also a quest for belonging to a group and a reconfiguration of social interactions in a world marked by increasing individualisation.

The analysis of Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning (1986) provided an additional theoretical framework for understanding this development. Their approach showed that sport was not simply entertainment, but a process that structured emotions and social cohesion. The study confirmed that team sports and physical activities acted as social regulators, establishing interactional codes to control impulses and channel tensions. This perspective has enabled us to better understand why certain social categories, in particular young adults and senior citizens, have found in sport an alternative socialisation space to family and professional settings, which are often marked by a fragmentation of social ties.

The discussion was also informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1996) who, although not Anglo-Saxon, has influenced many contemporary European sociologists. His concept of "bodily habitus" has helped us to understand why collective sporting practices have been differentiated according to the cultural and economic capital of individuals. The study showed that access to these new sporting sociabilities was unevenly distributed, with some social groups benefiting from



suitable structures and a family transmission of sporting values, while others encountered institutional or financial barriers limiting their participation. This differentiation illustrated the way in which sport, far from being a simple tool for universal integration, also functioned as a marker of social distinction.

Finally, Anthony Giddens (1990) provided a macro-sociological framework for analysing these results from the perspective of reflexive modernity. He showed that contemporary transformations in society have encouraged the emergence of new forms of sociability based on individual autonomy and networking. The development of team sport as a space for sociability is evidence of this reorganisation of social relations around chosen rather than imposed commitments. However, the results of this study also highlighted the limits of this trend, showing that these new sporting social activities have not completely supplanted traditional forms of social interaction, but have often been complementary or competitive, depending on the context and the social groups concerned.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study, rooted in a sociological approach to ageing and sociability, examined how food and sport acted as vectors of social cohesion among senior citizens in Côte d'Ivoire. The aim was to understand the extent to which these practices have helped to maintain or transform the forms of sociability of older people, in a context where the traditional dynamics of intergenerational solidarity have been confronted with socio-economic and cultural changes. The qualitative approach, based on a methodological triangulation combining semi-structured interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis, enabled us to explore in depth the individual and collective experiences of older people in the face of transformations in their eating and sporting practices.

The results revealed a tension between the persistence of traditional practices and the emergence of new forms of commitment, influenced by urbanisation, the medicalisation of lifestyles and economic inequalities. Food, which for a long time was structured by family and community considerations, has gradually become more individualised, while remaining an arena for the reproduction of social distinctions. Sport, once seen as a marginal activity for older people, has been reinvested as a tool for preserving well-being and socialising, although access to it has been conditioned by economic and cultural factors. The discussion highlighted the complexity of these dynamics, showing that older people have not simply been passive recipients of societal transformations, but have actively recomposed their practices according to their resources and social trajectories.

From a scientific point of view, this study has enriched the sociology of ageing in Africa by proposing an analysis of food and sports practices as markers of social differentiation and areas of identity recomposition. Geopolitically, it has enabled Côte d'Ivoire to be placed within a wider debate on the nutritional transition and the medicalisation of ageing, while highlighting the specific local features of the strategies used by senior citizens to adapt to global changes. These findings have prompted us to rethink public policies on ageing not just in biomedical terms, but by incorporating the cultural and social dimensions of the everyday practices of the elderly.

On an institutional level, it was recommended that an interdisciplinary approach be adopted in the design of health and social cohesion policies, involving sociologists, anthropologists and community development players. Strengthening sports facilities accessible to senior citizens, integrating cultural dimensions into nutritional awareness programmes and promoting intergenerational social spaces were identified as essential levers for combating isolation and encouraging active ageing. Finally, it was recommended that greater account be taken of the socio-economic realities of senior citizens, particularly in terms of access to quality food and appropriate sporting activities, to avoid further marginalisation of the most vulnerable groups.

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