

## Laamb and Ladja

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Senegal and Martinique lie at the same latitude, at the 14<sup>th</sup> parallel north that connects Africa with the Caribbean across the Atlantic Ocean. They are also two points along a sea route that favoured the arrival of large numbers of slaves coming from the west coast of Africa to this small Caribbean island. This essay follows this parallel and visually presents two forms of wrestling; the Laamb from Senegal and the *Ladja* from Martinique. Two war dances that through music, trance, and ancestry conduct the gestures of corporal resistance, until they emerge, in the crossing of physical and cultural borders between their expressions, in contemporary times.

On the small island of Martinique, still a French territory, life carries the burden and traces of time. *Ladja* imprints the marks of the diaspora in the flesh of its fighters, in the beating of the drums, and in the sorrow of its songs. In this Afro-Caribbean battle dance, syncopated vibrations of drums and singing lure the bodies into a trance. Metaphorically, *Ladja* presents itself as a possible plot of resistance that enables plunging into African roots.

Through an aesthetic force this rhythmic fight found only in the Caribbean, brings new mythical rearrangements, with no beginning or end, but circular like the stage of the fight, like the trajectory of the Earth that slowly glides in space, to let this movement, which we call time, heal the wounds of slavery. It is a war dance that is still marginal, little known internationally, a performative action practised by only a hundred people, a modest number to shake the social structures, but a strong presence to maintain the rhythm of the anti-colonial combat. It is the search for an independent path, a precious word whose weight oppresses those who have not yet conquered it, an adjective that marks the discrepancy of any power relation.

*Ladja* is the syncopated combat that tries to reverse the post-colonial dysrhythmia that insists on whispering melodies of domination.

Senegalese wrestling, or *Laamb* (in Wolof), is an ancestral practice adapted to the present day. It is internationally known and highly respected by the local community. The main matches happen in crowded stadiums and are broadcast live by the country's television channels. Some events attract an audience of up to thirty thousand people. It is also seen in the streets of the capital Dakar, through advertisements from the major telephone and credit card companies that use the image of the greatest wrestling champions. These gigantic fighters, some weighing more than 150 kilos, are seen as national heroes, they are the image of success.

It is an activity that has accompanied the urbanization process. On one hand, *Laamb* has adapted to contemporary Senegalese development; on the other, it continues to live on in the most remote villages deep within the country. In both cases, the fight has not given up its tradition. Both in the village and in the capital's large stadiums, the ritual maintains its foundations, passed on from generation to generation. Entering the arena to the sound of drums and the chorus of predominantly female voices, it is hard not to feel a strong energy. The fighters walk from one side to the other, and it is then that we notice the dance, the rhythm of their bodies. Each fighter enters accompanied by his *marabout*, the spiritual leader responsible for protection. With powerful *gri-gris*, magic potions distributed in different bottles, dried or even live animals, goat milk, and a dozen other objects, the *marabout* and his helpers fight together. It is a team effort; while the fighter faces his opponent using his body, the *marabouts* face each other magically, mixing liquids, burying objects, scratching the earth, and evoking powers from the rhythm of the blows. The audience participates actively in the combat, cheering, shouting, and adding their *gri-gris* and energy to the fighters.

Across the Black Atlantic, several African fights, such as *Laamb* have adapted and branched out into new expressions such as Martinique's *Ladja*, Capoeira in Brazil, and so many others already rooted out in this wider global region. In common, they keep the poly-rhythms and the memories re-signified on the skin. *Laamb* and *Ladja* carry rhythms in bodies that dialogue between tradition and the contemporary world. In this field of ritual and resistance, a differentiated vision of time prevails – that of the body which fights through dance.























