

Chapter Title: Benzema, Les Bleus and the Culture des Quartiers

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Book Title: The Beautiful Game on a Muslim Pitch

Book Subtitle: How Football and Religion are Shaping Identity and Society

Book Editor(s): Aaron W. Hughes, Leif Stenberg

Published by: Edinburgh University Press. (2025)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/jj.25700590.5>

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PART I

Football and the Maintenance of Identities

Benzema, *Les Bleus* and the Culture des Quartiers

SAMUEL SAMI EVERETT

Je ne comprends pas qu'à un moment, un ministre ou un représentant de la République en fasse quelque chose d'important alors qu'il y a des gens qui crèvent de faim, il y a du chômage [...] Ça me semble incroyable qu'on fasse porter les maux de la France à un petit gars de quartier [...]

I don't understand how a minister or a representative of the [French] Republic could make such a big deal of this when people are starving, when there's unemployment ... It's incredible to me that they blame all the evils of France on a little guy from a social housing neighbourhood.

Vikash Dhorasoo – Radio France International, 10 June 2016

#FreeBenzo

Booba 'Walabok', 2016

INTRODUCTION

Karim Benzema's name, more familiarly known as Benzé or Benzo, became, at least in the period 2015–20 when he was excluded from the French national football team (nicknamed *les bleus*), a political lightning rod for racialising polemics around Islam in France indexed against French–Algerian historical tensions and migration between the two countries.¹ The sex-tape affair of 2015,

¹ This chapter is a version of a paper that I gave at the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC) in London, 28–30 April 2022. Many thanks to those who were present for my presentation and who gave feedback. Particular thanks go to John McManus for written feedback on the first draft and to Carl Rommel for feedback on a later draft. Thanks also to the editors

which led to Benzema's exclusion, involved Benzema's complicity in black-mailing Matthieu Valbuena over a video of Valbuena having intercourse with a prostitute taken from the latter's phone. The extortion racket involved one of Benzema's childhood friends.

In 2017, before the news broke that Benzema would continue to be excluded and would not therefore be a part of the France squad for the 2018 Russia World Cup, the (now separated) comic duo Younes and Bambi – of second-generation Moroccan and Tunisian descent, respectively – released their spoof rap video *Benzé Benzé* on YouTube.² The song captured the difficulties that Didier Deschamps, the French national team coach, had in justifying not selecting Karima Benzema as well as Benzema's personal experiences of exile from the national team and being deemed persona non grata in France. *Benzé Benzé*, which became an internet hit, highlights the nexus between contemporary football, hip-hop and stand-up cultures rooted in *les quartiers*. These *quartiers* (neighbourhoods) are French post-colonial peri-urban social housing quarters known more disparagingly as *banlieues* (suburbs), and are often tough and almost always stigmatised residential areas.³ In the national imaginary they represent predominantly working-class sites of industrial (and today post-industrial) difficulty, structural neglect and social strife.⁴ But as a function of one's position on the political spectrum, they have either fallen foul of Islamism⁵ or have given rise to post-colonial effervescence, talent and potential.⁶

In this chapter I track the hidden subtexts⁷ within the lyrics of the song *Benzé Benzé* and the polemics evoked by the name, actions and words of the French Muslim footballer of Algerian descent Karim Benzema. Substantively, I analyse *Benzé, Benzé* in conjunction with data available on the web, for example in the social media feeds of footballing celebrities and their interviews with online sports and non-sports presses. The analysis tracks the cultural and celebrity landscape around Benzema within which he has become a legible figure or trope (Ellis 2014), but also an active agent. I engage specifically with the historical and discursive dynamics of Benzema's particularly French case of racialisation⁸ – to which I aim to give contextual depth. I argue that the specifics of the Benzema case need excavating as they relate to a two-way

Aaron Hughes and Leif Stenberg. Finally, thanks to Jessica Binks for her editorial work on the chapter and Donald Dinwiddie for his copy-editing and comments.

² Link to the YouTube clip of *Benzé Benzé* by Younes and Bambi (accessed 4 January 2023).

³ Tissot 2013.

⁴ Soullignac and Ghorra-Ghobin 1995.

⁵ Brenner 2002.

⁶ Silverstein 2018.

⁷ Scott 1990.

⁸ For the purposes of this chapter, I will use Reza Zia-Ebrahimi's definition of racialisation: 'a discursive strategy that postulates the existence of a race on the basis of certain characteristics perceived of as essential' (Zia-Ebrahimi 2021: 24).

intergenerational post-colonial trauma. Finally, I question static state notions of French-ness, against which I counterpoise plural *cultures des quartiers* at the overlap between spheres of post-colonial spectacle: football, stand-up comedy and hip-hop.

My explanation and analysis of the song *Benzé Benzé* is the chapter's central thread and is broken down into four parts starting with the so-called sex-tape affair, its background and the reactions it provoked, and Younes and Bambi's counter-discursive take on it. In the second part, I move to the debate around racism in Benzema's ban and how it demonstrates a declension of French racisms and the salience of Islam and the Maghrib in these. In the third part, and in order to best understand these specificities, I double back to unpack diasporic sentiments of distance from France as crystallised in the historical and spatial specificity of the *hawma/quartier* (neighbourhood) as it intersects with Franco-Algerian footballing relations and plural post-colonial French-Maghribi *cultures des quartiers*, of which football is a central part.⁹ Finally, in the fourth part, I turn to the racialisation of Islam within the case of Benzema and that which he represents, with a particular focus on the vector of social media. The postscript details Benzema's comeback and hypothesises its importance to the contemporary conjuncture of football and politics.

BENZÉ BENZÉ

The music video of the song *Benzé Benzé* is set just outside the Stade de France, France's largest sports and concert stadium located in St Denis – which contains some of Paris' (and France's) most iconic social housing neighbourhoods. In the video, the song's authors and singers, Younes and Bambi, wear a Real Madrid and a France shirt, respectively, both of which Karim Benzema *should*, according to the aggrandising message of the song, have been wearing at the time of the song's release: '*Benzé ou nada*' / 'Benzema or nothing', they sing towards the end of the song. Younes and Bambi came to fame in the early 2010s thanks to the support of French stand-up superstar Jamel Debbouze. They were performing at France's most renowned stand-up comedy club owned by Debbouze, 'Le Jamel Comedy Club', in central Paris. The title *Benzé Benzé* riffs off the similarity between Benzé (the abbreviation of Karim Benzema's surname) and 'Benz', which in French is short for Mercedes-Benz, the luxury automobile brand that Benzema has often been photographed or filmed in and alongside.

⁹ The meaning of *hawma* or neighbourhood stems from the word's Arabic root: a perimeter drawn by the circular scope of what one can see (Grangaud 2013).

Benzé Benzé

APL – Y&B Music [extracts/short excerpt]

Younes and Bambi:

Benzé, Benzé, Benzé, Benzé

Benzé, Benzé, Benzé, Benzé

Younes:

TEJ, TEJ, TEJ, TEJ, TEJ, TEJ, TEJ

Chucked, chucked, chucked,
chucked

On m'a *tej* de l'équipe de France

They chucked me out of the French
team

Je me suis fais balancer par Valbuena

I got stitched up by Valbuena

J'vois des frères sélectionnés à la

I see brothers get called up like

Chimbonda

Chimbonda

[...]

Bambi:

Je touchais les APL quand j'étais
tout petit

I used to get housing benefit when
I was small

J crois bien qu'j'suis condamné
à ne jouer qu'à Madrid

I think I must be sentenced
to always play for Madrid

[...]

Adieu la sélection,
nique la fédération

Goodbye to the French team
f*** the [French football] federation

Algérie, Portugal, appelle *le* CR7

Algeria, Portugal call CR7 [Ronaldo]

Set to a slow blend of melodious Caribbean chords and drumbeats, the lyrics of *Benzé Benzé*, though heavy in slang, are subtitled in the video and as the rapping speed is not too quick the song is eminently understandable and easy for both peri-urban and middle-class youth to connect with.

I. THE SEX-TAPE AFFAIR

In the song, Younes and Bambi satirise the French vilification of Benzema relating to his involvement in the so-called sex-tape affair. Recall, the much mediatised 'sex-tape affair' saw Benzema complicit, alongside one of Benzema's childhood friends, in blackmailing French national football teammate Matthieu Valbuena over footage of his sexual relations with a prostitute taken from the latter's phone. Younes and Bambi's parodying of Benzema's treatment is both political satire and affectionate, arguing the case of structural racism against Benzé. *Benzé Benzé* starts with the word *tej* repeated seven times by Younes. The word, which comes from the past participle of the verb *jeter* (to throw) in *verlan* (back-to-front slang), becoming *téje* or *tej* in its contracted form, provides

a leitmotif for a darkly humorous interior monologue within Karim Benzema's mind: '*on m'a tej de l'équipe de france*' / 'They threw [or chucked] me out of the French national team'. '*Je me suis fais balancer par Valbuena*' / 'I got stitched up by Valbuena': playing on the infinitive of *jeter*, to throw (or chuck – which *balancer* can also mean, though not in this context). The imagined Benzema claims that instead of paying his friend not to go public, Matthieu Valbuena, Benzema's French national teammate and supposed victim of the sex-tape film, went to the authorities and betrayed Benzema, jeopardising the team's future chances of success or as Younes and Bambi put it in the song: '*l'attaque est éclatée car t'es parti poucave*' / 'the [France] attack is broken because you went and ratted'.

Unlike the more clean-cut Zinedine Zidane or 'Zizou' (Zidane's moniker) to whom he is often compared, Karim Benzema is moulded by the Gangsta Rap genre in the public allure that he conveys, particularly on social media, of which his favoured platform is Instagram. While his religious practice – he is visibly Muslim – is viewed with suspicion as purportedly incompatible with the values of the French Republic's equalities and freedoms,¹⁰ Gangsta Rap gets aligned with bad-boy behaviour¹¹ and a singular thuggish *culture des quartiers*.¹²

After the affair, Benzema was effectively banned from *les bleus* (the national team) for his then presumed role in it. A national team regular before this, he was called up neither for the 2016 Euros nor for the 2018 World Cup. Though difficult to disentangle from footballing arguments, the Fédération Française de Football (FFF) appeared to mete out their punishment to Benzema based on his ethical behaviour. As the representative of the FFF, the French team coach Didier Deschamps – nicknamed the water carrier (for doing the unglamorous footballing hard graft in midfield when he was a player) – side-stepped Benzema's non-selection, stating instead that he saw commitment to a collective team ethic as tantamount to success.

Both France's daily national sports newspaper *L'Équipe* and the broadsheet *Le Monde* brazenly flouted the defence's right to confidentiality and presumption of innocence by publishing the entirety of Benzema's police interrogation.¹³ The thuggery of Benzema's complicity was taken for granted; Valbuena's complete innocence also. In the song, however, Younes and Bambi invite us to see the incident as a practical joke between sporting friends/colleagues in a male world where practices of sharing and filming women is normalised: '*grosse couille dans*

¹⁰ Hajjat and Mohammed 2016.

¹¹ Silverstein 2002.

¹² The Netflix production *Athena* (Gavras 2022) is a shameless exercise in the racialisation of *le quartier*, depicting predominantly faceless French Arab and sub-Saharan Muslim youth gangs at war with a police force represented as powerless. Each of the central characters (three brothers) is the incarnation of a trope of Arab stereotyping: the resistance fighter turned terrorist, the gangster and the powerless ghetto-dweller turned soldier.

¹³ Jakubowicz 2019: 87.

l'écran, quand tu ken je ricane / 'large balls on the screen, when you're f*****, I'm laughing', sings Bambi, imagining the reality of the scene and how the two players would joke about it. In Younes and Bambi's depiction, it is Benzema who is the victim of a ban, a form of boycott, as Benzema himself put it in a Spanish interview: *'Ha plegado a la presión de una parte racista de Francia'* / 'He [Didier Deschamps] bowed to the pressure of a racist part of France'.¹⁴

There is a whole separate discussion to be had about hyper-masculine misbehaviour and posturing among male footballers (and the attendant objectification, denigration and abuse of women that plays such a large part of it). But the focus of this chapter is on the way that Benzema, within that culture, was apparently only joking when he 'blackmailed' Valbuena. And certainly, that is how many among Benzema's male fan base chose to interpret it (as did Bambi and Younis). His singling out for punishment was therefore 1) a failure of 'sense of humour' on Valbuena's part (possibly racially motivated or perhaps he simply did not like Benzema, we cannot know) and 2) that the French football establishment chose to use Benzema as a scapegoat which in turn led to a political venting of racialising, often 'clash-of-civilisations', impulses.

II. RACISM IN THE BENZEMA BAN

The racism of the ban was not explicit. It appeared to track on to representational stereotypes of Arabs in France deeply lodged in the historical consciousness, also evidenced in other players' experiences, to which I now turn. Bambi satirises perennial far-right accusations of Arab benefit hoarding when his fictitious Benzema says: *'Je touchais les APL quand j'étais tout petit'* / 'I got housing benefit when I was very young', *'j crois bien qu'j' suis condamné à ne jouer qu'à Madrid'* / 'I'm sure that I'm condemned only to ever play at Madrid', blending together Benzema's then possible future sentencing for the sex-tape affair and an imagined exile, a self-imposed sentence, for benefit fraud. After the scandal and his ban, the imagined Benzé of the song is pained to see French national team call-ups for replacement players such as Pascal Chimbonda, who was accused of similar vices to Benzema, closely aligned, it might be noted, to the sins of greed, pride, wrath and envy. Chimbonda was selected for the national squad during the period of Benzema's ban, despite having been arrested on suspicion of conspiracy to defraud and several instances of violent behaviour (on the pitch), though, it should be noted, Chimbonda did not end up playing even a minute of a match for the national team.¹⁵ Not incidentally, Chimbonda is

¹⁴ Benzema interview in *Marca* (2016).

¹⁵ Not playing a single minute of competitive football deprived Chimbonda of a competitive international cap, a symbolic gesture for most new called-up players to the national squad.

a tall, strong and athletic Black defender, the insertion of whom into the song alludes to the polemic Laurent Blanc raised when he was recorded saying that there is an overabundance of ‘big, strong and powerful’ Black players in the French game.¹⁶

To put into context Younes and Bambi’s nod to Pascal Chimbonda, the desire to distance oneself from French national culture and those racisms experienced within it, which Benzema actively reflects in his leisure videos from Madrid and Miami, is a common theme also among French footballers of Afro-Caribbean descent – both Muslim and non-Muslim. Experiences with the institution of the national team via interactions with the FFF and France’s cutting-edge National Technical Centre for Football at Clairefontaine can be catalysts for this. In a profile piece on Chimbonda in *L’Équipe*, the player stated that he was never recognised in France – despite his success in English league football, from the Premier league to the lower EFL leagues as he got older and eventually moved into management – and that this is directly related to France’s undigested colonial past. He felt he was only able to thrive personally and professionally in the north of England.¹⁷ This sentiment chimes with the ongoing battle against racism of Patrice Evra – captain of France during the 2010 South Africa World Cup – in the French game. As Evra has become older, he has conducted this battle from afar, focusing on promoting a positive global image of western Africa to counteract racist clichés. In an interview with *Sports Brief*, he stated that if he had had his time to do over again he would have chosen ‘to represent the country of my birth, Senegal, instead of France’.¹⁸ While the levelling of disloyalty and anti-French Republic identification at Black players is less prominent than against North African-descent French Arab-Muslim players, similar ambivalences persist towards France among all these players. France is seen by them as, simultaneously, a land of opportunity and generative of deeply divisive racial discourse and urban segregation.

Benzema, Chimbonda and Evra’s discomfort at a perception of racism in France is the continuation of a thread that ran through the period 2010 to 2018 and the South Africa, Brazil and Russia World Cups that France crashed out of, were unconvincing in and won, respectively. These experiences reinforced, at least on a sporting level, the perspective that French national football should not mix with politics or religious praxis and that players would be rewarded for their subservience to the greater Republican good and an absolute adherence to the race/religion-blind adage of *égalité* (equality) that purportedly divisive figures such as Patrice Evra were seen as jeopardising. While the sporting formula

¹⁶ See Amselle 2011: 1.

¹⁷ Corcostegui and Minonzio 2022.

¹⁸ Lukma 2022.

appears to have worked, racialising discourse has become increasingly bold in the French public sphere.

The Muslim players who have been privileged since Benzema's sidelining do not appear to fast during Ramadan¹⁹ and keep their political opinions to themselves, particularly on subjects touching on racism. In parallel to these tensions between race-based activism and French national sport, the 2010s coincided with Algeria's sensational foray into the FIFA top 20, losing narrowly to Germany in the second round of the 2014 World Cup tournament. A good proportion of the Fennecs (the nickname for the Algerian national team) were born in France and had been through the French national football youth system, including trips to the National Technical Centre for Football at Clairefontaine. The Algerian national team strongly identifies as Islamic, partaking in collective prostration after scoring a goal, and showing great pride in national symbols including the ubiquitous Algerian flag. In 2019, Algeria won the Coupe d'Afrique des Nations (CAN – Africa Cup of Nations) with Riyad Mahrez at the helm, who was born in a tough peri-urban town called Sarcelles to the north of greater Paris. Over the same period in international football, the fortunes of Karim Benzema, who chose to represent France, could not have diverged more from those of his peer Mahrez, who chose instead to represent Algeria.²⁰ The 1998 World Cup winner turned critical documentary-maker Vikash Dhorasso affirmed at the time of the sex-tape affair that the FFF's punishment of Benzema was racist. It was particularly coloured by a negative discourse towards Islam in France, that is, a specifically French racialisation of North African Arab-Muslims which has centred on and been embodied by Benzema. By contrast, Dhorasso described Benzema as a *petit gars de quartier* ('little guy' from the neighbourhoods), i.e. guilty only of being from a racially stigmatised population and place. While Dhorasso's words resonate, particularly because of the FFF's inequitable treatment of Benzema and Deschamps' subsequent focus on player exemplarity, the scapegoating of Benzema in French public opinion (Jakubowicz 2019: 90) appears to compound Ellis's thesis (2014) that celebrities are considered as markers of societal moods and not as individuals. Nevertheless, Dhorasso's mild infantilisation of Benzema and too sharp a focus on the figurative detracts from Benzema's agency, the much-maligned notion of Race in France, the historical specifics of French Muslim footballers of Algerian descent and the national tensions inherent in their positioning. After all, over the course of his career, Benzema as both an individual with an Algerian family and as a representational figure has gone on record to say that he will not sing the *Marseillaise* (the French national anthem)

¹⁹ Métairie 2018.

²⁰ Everett 2023.

because it is a war cry and that he is against war,²¹ and that he loves Algeria above all else. Thus, this *petit gars des quartier* is also the inheritor of what Karima Lazali calls the forgotten world of Algerian trauma. Such experiences, Lazali argues, are lived out across generations in France upon which multiple histories of violent colonial French pacification, which stopped people from resisting, were and continue to be enacted.²² I turn next to these intergenerational and diasporic dynamics of trauma.

III. CULTURES DES QUARTIERS AND DIASPORA

The hip-hop–stand-up comedy fusion associated with the *quartier* and represented by Younes and Bambi in *Benzé Benzé* is perceived to be part and parcel of a transgressive diasporic *culture des quartiers* that Benzema both projects in his social media feeds and which periodically emerges as a trope of racialised polemics around the danger of Islam in France.²³ In addition to hip-hop and stand-up comedy,²⁴ football too is a part of these cultures. The connection between these three spheres of post-colonial spectacle and the notion of the *quartier* serve to sketch out its specific Algerian historical, diasporic and at times traumatic resonances.

The stand-up comedy genre and much of the material that is derived for it stems from the plural *quartiers*. For Younes and Bambi an important part of their act was the fact that Younes is nominally Muslim and Bambi Jewish, something they brought out in their on-stage personae ‘*Younes et Bambi un juif et un arabe*’ / ‘Younes and Bambi a Jew and an Arab’.²⁵ Since their split, they have moved in different directions, Younes creating films caricaturing everyday lives in Turkish kebab kitchens and Bambi guest starring in France’s premier private channel Canal Plus. Outside of their Arab-Jewish act, they have simultaneously operated in and satirised the worlds of football and hip-hop alongside football players, social media pundits and hip-hop industry influencers, many of whom have northern and sub-Saharan African diasporic roots. For example, one of their sketches is a take-off of Fian-so (Sofiane, a major French rap artist and now producer), whose show *Rentre dans le Cercle* (*Enter into the Circle*) promotes raw new French hip-hop talent from a variety of backgrounds. Younes and Bambi film their own slapstick version called *Sort du Cercle* (*Get Out of the Circle*), showcasing dire new Rap artists, a hotchpotch group with whom Younes and Bambi have also filmed themselves playing and watching football games, often

²¹ Simon 2018.

²² Lazali 2018.

²³ Jouili 2018.

²⁴ Everett and Vince 2020: 1.

²⁵ Bharat 2020: 279.

with grave social and mental issues – themes on which socially engaged French hip-hop has often been based.

The hip-hop music genre is often associated with *les quartiers* in France²⁶ and artists such as Médine and Kerry James are seen by the mainstream media and politicians as simultaneously aggressively proselytising and making violent post-colonial political assertions.²⁷ It is in this space, channelled by social media, at the intersection between emerging entertainment and sporting *cultures des quartiers* still faithful to working-class immigrant roots and often religious traditionalism, that Younes and Bambi operate. Their very public love of Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) as real football fans from the ghetto was how the duo met and this love was the subject around which their initial sketches were developed. They later spent much of their public-leisure time in hip-hop circles, as documented by their Facebook and Instagram social media channels. Meanwhile, Karim Benzema, fan of hip-hop, is part of the same milieu: he figured in France's premier rap artist Booba's *Walabok* music video in 2016,²⁸ during his period in exile from the national team. The video ends with the hashtag #freeBenzo, presumably referring to his sentence by the FFF. Younes and Bambi, like Benzema, navigate the intersections of these different publics, from social media to mainstream media, by using their capacity to code-switch between the republican requirement to *parler bien* (speak well) in press conferences and chat shows, and the street slang that they grew up with and that they use in the dressing room, on stage and on social media. This proximity and mutual understanding is one of the reasons that legitimises Younes and Bambi to depict Benzema in their song.

Historically, before Karim Benzema, it was Michel Platini and Zinedine Zidane who, from the very pinnacle of the world footballing stage, represented *les quartiers*. Platini was born to northern Italian parents in the *quartier* of Joeuf on the outskirts of Metz in northeastern France, baptised 'little Italy' for its predominantly Italian migrant worker population. Zidane was born to parents from Kabylia, northern Algeria, in the Castellane *quartier* on the northern periphery of Marseille, which remains one of France's poorest neighbourhoods and was originally built as a public housing estate for refugees of the Algerian war of independence in the 1950s. Both Platini and Zidane were much-loved for their, at times, left-field style and attitude – Platini never wore shin pads and was famed for his scruffiness and showing emotion after the games (which was less common then), Zidane for his bow legs, bald patch and at times allowing his temper to boil over, vestiges perhaps of the *quartier*. Interestingly, both stars played their best club football outside France and so at a distance from their

²⁶ See Hammou 2012: 136.

²⁷ Semiond 2021.

²⁸ Sar 2016. The video by Booba (Élie Yaffa), which can be found here: <https://youtu.be/i6rOqosJRgE> (accessed 1 September 2022), features Karim Benzema briefly towards the end (3.15min).

quartiers. Platini was at Juventus in Turin, Zidane was at Juventus too and then at Real Madrid, where he later coached Karim Benzema. Identifying strongly with Italy, Platini's move to La Juvé was something of a return, while for Zidane the Spanish capital was as close as he could get to his parents' cherished Kabylia in terms of atmosphere and climate without leaving the high-profile European footballing leagues.²⁹

The diasporic leanings of Platini and Zidane are just as stark, if not more so, for Karim Benzema and his family history. An observant Muslim whose father was from Tighzert in Kabylia (his mother, of western Algerian descent from Oran, was born in Lyon), Benzema was born in Bron-Terrailon to the east of Lyon in south central France, a neighbourhood to which he is strongly attached.³⁰ Bron was constructed to extend the city of Lyon in 1962 during *les trente glorieuses*, the so-called glorious thirty years of post-war economic boom that began in the 1950s. Though Platini came from a Catholic family, like Zidane (who is at least nominally Muslim), religion never figured in his public persona. At the time, the question of religion perhaps held less political salience and both Zidane and Platini were less constantly in the limelight than Benzema, for whom the ubiquity of social media – as both a tool of celebrity curation and an electronic tag of expectation – means that the spotlight is inescapable. Such invasive attention was not yet so widespread for Zidane and Platini. Instagram, for example, was created only in 2010, four years after Zidane retired as a footballer.

Of Kabyle descent like Karim Benzema, the overall impression of Zidane and his legacy as a public figure is of a mild-mannered player/coach³¹ who is well behaved in public due to his Berber background, which myth holds to be close to European (Roman) civilisation, and unlike Arab culture.³² Dissimilar to 'Zizou' and 'Platoche', Benzema's persona lends itself to contrast: he is simultaneously a glitzy, image-conscious, Gangsta-styled celebrity and a humble Muslim – twin imaginaries of *les quartiers*: Bad Boy and Muslim culture. His Islam is visible by way of his imposing beard and his social media accounts over which he recites blessings for the Islamic high holidays such as Eid.³³ Benzema has appeared on social media with the imam of the Badr mosque in Meaux (the eastern part of greater Paris), Nouredine Mamoune, known for his piety. Extremely keen on fashion,³⁴ Benzema's identification with Islam transpires too in sporting a 'Fear of G-d' branded jacket. In terms of Gangsta Rap, he makes constant reference to the deceased rapper Tupac Shakur, replicating Tupac's distinctive hand sign

²⁹ Hermel 2019.

³⁰ Caioli and Collot 2020.

³¹ Hermel 2019.

³² Silverstein 2004.

³³ In an interview he also stated that he listens to *soulat* (words of G-d, as he puts it) for ten minutes before each game to meditate and relax.

³⁴ Benzema 2019.

(a 'W' for West Coast) on his Instagram leisure photos. Closer to home, he appears to style himself on the avant garde, *anti-laïque* (anti-secular) French Muslim rapper Medine and he is close to critical French Muslim rap star Booba.

Towards the end of *Benzé Benzé*, Bambi turns Benzema into a ghetto rebel: 'Adieu la sélection, nique la fédération, Algérie, Portugal, appel le CR7' / 'see-ya to the French team, f*** the federation [of French football], Portugal and Algeria, call CR7'. Portugal and Algeria are France's great footballing rivals and the two most significant diasporic populations residing predominantly in the *quartiers*. The French team, without Benzema, in 2016 suffered a humiliating 1-0 defeat in Paris at the Euro final to Portugal. The Franco-Portuguese partied all night on the Champs-Élysées, rather like the Franco-Algerian partying after the impressive displays of the Algerian team in 2014 and 2019. 'Appel le CR7' is an allusion to both Cristiano Ronaldo (and his favoured number 7), the player in whose shadow Benzema played for most of his career at Real Madrid, as well as evoking the emergency number for the *Sapeurs Pompier* (Fire Brigade), to put out the fire that the implicitly anti-French festivities of celebrating Algerian or Portuguese victories ignite. From benefit fraud to arch bad-boy, Bambi's derision is poignant and elucidates Benzema's bind: if he is in Madrid, it's because he cannot bear the scrutiny around him in France, yet if he complains that there are issues pertaining to the racialisation of Muslims in France he is held up to the light of his *quartier* background's supposed thuggery.

While Zidane, whose name features prominently in *Benzé Benzé*, has always appeared as a very private and family-oriented man, Karim Benzema has been uncompromising in publicly representing his childhood in Bron-Terrailon. During the 2020 Covid-19-lockdown, Benzema conducted multiple 'live' events on Instagram often animated by DJs and MCs local to Bron-Terrailon. Benzema remains viscerally and demonstrably attached to his *quartier*, which he visits frequently, with shots, for example, of him sitting on the terrace of his mother's high-rise apartment there. Bron-Terrailon acts as a *hawma* (neighbourhood) for Benzema, which in the North African vernacular Arabic of his parents serves as an important local affective and intergenerational reference point. The *hawma* was a key locale of resistance against the French during the Algerian war of independence and before that was the key marker of the Algerian Muslim football clubs' urban community identity which developed in opposition to European colonial ones.³⁵

Perhaps the remoteness of living in Madrid (and today in Jeddah) added affective resonance to Bron-Terrailon as an imagined and no-longer-lived space for Benzema woven together with the memories of familial migratory histories from Algeria to France. While Karim Benzema's father, Hafid Benzema,

³⁵ Bouaouina 2007: 6.

was making the journey to Lyon with his family from Kabylia, the Front de Libération National (FLN) was bringing Algerian players back to North Africa from France where many had played.³⁶ On 14 April 1958, ten Algerian players responded to the call of the FLN and slipped out of France to convene in Tunis.³⁷ They included Rachid Mekhloufi and Moustapha Zitouni, who by that time had made it in the French league and become stars, and were thus being granted fast-track French status. These ten formed the nucleus of the FLN team which would play over a hundred exhibition matches between 1958 and 1962 with nations favourable to Algerian self-determination, which included China, Vietnam, the Soviet Union and Cuba, in addition to many decolonised African countries. Any national team hosting the FLN Algerian team agreed to fly the Algerian flag and play the anthem.³⁸

Even as it was becoming increasingly clear that Algeria would eventually achieve independence and that France would have to play against the newly established Algerian nation state, France pushed back against these symbolic matches, vetoing FIFA recognition of the FLN football team and even threatening economic sanctions against those nations that hosted Algeria. The FLN team represented the freedom for indigenous Algerians to organise their own civic and sporting associations as a step towards self-determination. In this sense the FLN team was a way for the colonised to make their voices heard as they subverted the established order set by the FFF and FIFA, the latter established in France at the apex of its imperial power in 1904.³⁹ Bearing in mind these historical contexts of *hawma*, the FLN and football as resistance, it is of little wonder that historical Franco–Algerian footballing tensions sit heavy on the shoulders of those players of Algerian descent like Benzema whose familial trajectories intersected directly with those dynamics of conflict and subversion.

IV. THE RACIALISATION OF ISLAM

The local-level allegiance to the French periphery in the form of *le quartier* and its diasporic pre-history in the *hawma* dovetails with the fact that Benzema, unlike Zidane, upsets the French sporting status quo in his visible Islamic observance – wearing an Islamic beard, listening to *sourat* (chapter of the Quran) before playing, disseminating blessings on the high holidays and making *zakat* (almsgiving). And now he has also moved to Saudi Arabia to pursue his footballing career – that is de facto both local (from Bron) and transnational (stemming from Algeria and enacted in Madrid and now in Jeddah). French hip-hop

³⁶ Dine 2019.

³⁷ Bouandel and Amara 2019.

³⁸ Masseguin 2019.

³⁹ Everett 2022.

culture, of which *Benzé Benzé*, albeit satirical, is an example, due to its purported proximity with Islam and Muslim men, is by corollary seen as a dangerous vehicle for *dua*’ (the invocation or the act of supplication).⁴⁰ Benzema serves as the figure of one such Muslim man. For instance, he prays on the pitch and therefore makes public *dua*’ on the television; he invests in a Mosque in Bron (*zakat*) and he publicly fasts during Ramadan (one of the five pillars of Islam). This rigour carries onto both the football pitch (from which Benzema has never been expelled by way of a red card in his career) and his ‘fiscal patriotism’, having always paid his taxes in France (Garcia 2022). By contrast, as a public celebrity he speaks his mind regularly, allowing himself to be filmed by childhood friends and acquaintances who conduct video conferences with him on Instagram. From this platform, he speaks his mind about his misdemeanours and sometimes enters ‘clash’ mode, for example comparing himself to a Formula One racing car while likening Olivier Giroud, who replaced him in the national team, to a go-kart. In these informal but live chat fora, Benzema also discusses his mental strength of always having a winner’s mindset, something that can be found in the blend of mystic Sufism and self-help philosophy of early 2000s Indonesian Islamic television preachers⁴¹ which has spread into the French-speaking online Islamic spaces with which he identifies.

For the French public, if Zidane has always been the French Maghribi golden boy – more Berber than Muslim – then Benzema has most certainly been the villain – *le méchant*. This is at least in part because Islam has taken political centre stage in European and particularly French debates around integration since 9/11⁴² and France’s World Cup/Euro double (1998, 2000) in the years prior to the World Trade Center attacks in 2001. In French football, the lead-up and period after 9/11 coincided with the consolidation of Zinedine Zidane’s status as an all-time national footballing hero. However, as Zidane’s headbutt in the 2006 France v Italy World Cup Final has become a distant memory and Islamophobia has steadily seeped further into mainstream politics⁴³ – the *Rassemblement National* (RN) now being perhaps France’s foremost political force⁴⁴ – so another French Muslim player of Algerian descent called Karim Benzema has come to dominate in the French headlines as well as on the scoresheet of Real Madrid and now Al-Ittihad Jeddah FC.

⁴⁰ Aidi 2014.

⁴¹ Hoestery 2015.

⁴² Bowen 2008.

⁴³ Zia-Ebrahimi 2021.

⁴⁴ The Front National (FN), now rebranded RN, won the second most seats in the French assembly in the French legislative elections of June 2022. Some political commentators hypothesised that this occurred in part thanks to the RN having been surpassed in anti-Muslim vitriol by Eric Zemmour’s *Reconquête* (reconquest) party.

Though this has been tempered since his departure from Real Madrid and his arrival in Saudi Arabia, Benzema's social media feeds showcase a 'bling' lifestyle of fast cars, expensive fashion and merchandising⁴⁵ in conjunction to his sporting excellence, or as Younes and Bambi put it, '*je pose sur ma lambo je gagne la Liga Liga*' / 'I pose on my Lamb(orghini) and win the Spanish Liga Liga [League]'. For the French moralising right, however, this is ill fitting with Christian-inclined perceptions of what devout religious ethics should look like. Two parallel footballing references elucidate this: that of then Chelsea FC and French national team midfield dynamo N'Golo Kanté, who has now joined Karim Benzema at Al-Ittihad Club and Olivier Giroud the striker, then of Arsenal and now of Los Angeles FC, who took Benzema's place on the French team. Each serves as a counterpoint illustrating a specific anti-Maghribi and Islamophobic discursive racialisation at play in the Benzema ban.

The racialisation of Benzema is subtle. It operates through a moralising mechanism whereby as a Muslim, son of a migrant and person of Algerian descent, his adherence to neutrality and apparent apoliticality in matters relating to French institutions – of which the national sport and the FFF/French national team are parts – are a fundamental *quid pro quo* in order for him to qualify for the national team. Though this is never said outright, in addition to Benzema's speaking out about racism in France – backed by celebrity heavyweights such as former PSG star and French national team player Vikash Dhorasoo and Booba, historically perhaps France's foremost hip-hop name – a central component of the public opinion that marginalised Benzema from the national team related to his misplaced loyalties in Algerian patriotism and his visible Islamic piety perceived to be incompatible with his bling. Yet as Jonas Otterbeck has argued, a European Muslim middle-class demand for consumer culture in the form of, for example, global Islamic pop music is a response to social mobility and success.⁴⁶

It is perhaps the proximity of Euro-Maghribi Islam and the demand from within it for targeted consumer goods that so scares the ethno-nationalist philosophy in France: here is a parallel neo-liberal model to French republicanism. A counter-example would be N'Golo Kanté, who is also visibly Muslim but is famed for his unostentatious living. While there is stereotyping too in so much media focus on Kanté's Black African humility, it differs from the aggressive nature of the attacks on Benzema as a proud, uncivil and morally dangerous role model for French youth.⁴⁷ The Arab-Islamic stereotypes and Franco-Algerian rivalry underline such bias. Likewise, Olivier Giroud, the similarly aged striker (born in 1986, Benzema was born in 1987) who replaced Karim Benzema like for

⁴⁵ Karim Benzema recently signed a deal with Jean Paul Gaultier for a jointly marketed sunglasses range.

⁴⁶ Otterbeck 2021: 3.

⁴⁷ Lochard 2016: 835.

like in the national team, is a fervent and very public Evangelical Christian.⁴⁸ Though far more expressive about his faith than Benzema, Giroud is very seldom castigated for it, nor is he held to account against a religious moral compass. In *Benzé Benzé*, Younes and Bambi tell Deschamps that Giroud will warm the bench and that he cannot win a World Cup without *sauce algérienne* (a mildly sweet but spicy sauce offered when ordering a kebab in Francophone Europe and North Africa), meaning Benzema. However, despite considerably less favourable statistics (goals, assists), it is Giroud that has consistently played the classic centre forward position for France since 2016. And since March 2023, Giroud has become the oldest ever player to play for France.

The figure of Benzema is the perfect foil for an anti-Muslim racism embedded in conspiracy: he is read as an ethically dubious individual representing a collective Arab sporting genius to such an extent that in 2023 the French Ministry of the Interior accused him of having ‘notable links’ to the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement considered to be a terrorist organisation in France. After goading Olivier Giroud that he had better button it because Benzé and Zizou are best mates, a reference to Benzema and Zidane’s shared origin and proximity at Real Madrid, Bambi sings ‘*Je n’ai plus peur de Marine, je suis rassuré par Macron*’ / ‘I am no longer frightened by Marine [Le Pen], I am reassured by [Emmanuel] Macron’. Appearing shortly after the 2017 French Presidential elections, the song line seems to reflect the national mood that the RN has become a mainstream party.⁴⁹ For Benzema, of course Le Pen is frightening – she claimed that he hid his wickedness in his scandalous claims of French racism⁵⁰ – and Macron’s own record is anything but reassuring, having for three years never sought to address the worrying discourses latent to Benzema’s national team ban.

CONCLUSION AND POSTSCRIPT

The hidden transcripts of Younes and Bambi’s song *Benzé Benzé* encapsulate the points of tension around Benzema’s persona, public opinion and how he has been represented in the press as well as the actions of the French State in its instantiation as the FFF. Younes and Bambi are part of a plural suburban youth cultural dynamics from the *quartiers* which includes numerous footballing references and is often conducted on social media. Karim Benzema, fan of hip-hop, is also a part of these dynamics and an actor within them with agency, a discursive

⁴⁸ Wolf-Mandroux 2019.

⁴⁹ The 2017 Presidential election success was the Le Pen family’s second Presidential second round run-off, the third was in 2022.

⁵⁰ Chrisafis 2016.

strategy and significant backers.⁵¹ These are cultures that blend the spectacle – of the stage or the stadium – with the digital, consumed via a smartphone. The spectacle is condensed and edited into video highlights that are fed back in a loop across social media channels, making consumption of these cultures together part of the same online experience – for example, watching ‘best of’ videos of goals put to music and vignettes of humour.

The spectacle interlocks with a media ecosystem of polemic and clash. Reacting to the sex-tape polemic and its repercussions, cited in the introduction to this chapter, former PSG and French national team footballer Vikash Dhorasso turned counter-discursive documentary maker found it hard not to see multiple levels of racism within the FFF decision to exclude Benzema in 2016. But then in 2021, with a rare lack of a ministerial outing for the occasion, Benzema was reinstated into the national team, seemingly healing some of the representational rifts between Valbuena the Hispano-Gaul and Benzema the Franco-Moor. Benzema’s comeback was underscored as a ‘coming of age’ and that the virtue of his hard work had paid dividends, to which one of Benzema’s Instagram Highlight channels attests in its name *Charbon*, literally meaning ‘coal’ and short for ‘*aller au charbon*’ / ‘to go to the coal face’, a figurative phrase particularly resonant for the coal-mining area around Lyon that means ‘hard work’ and on which Benzema posts videos and selfies of himself working out hard. Yet at the Qatar World Cup in November and December 2022, Benzema suffered an injury and was not part of the French team that got to the final. As if to spoil the fairy-tale ending, once more he was replaced by Giroud.

We are constantly reminded football is about winning, but the politicality of football, I suggest, can be seen in Benzema’s gradual demonstration of a shift in mentality and a flattening out of his socio-political dissent since the sex-tape period such that the figure of Benzema could be redeemed on the French public stage. After the wilderness years of exclusion from the national team, many saw his call-up for the 2020 Euro Championship (played in 2021) as a restorative measure by France towards the peripheries of its cities, *les quartiers*. Though Benzema’s move to Saudi Arabia has revived state-level Islamophobic sentiment, I want to suggest nevertheless that his story of redemption through hard work and the wisdom of maturity may also mark a shifting attitude towards the high-level motivational intensity of Islamic piety combined with an increasing proximity to celebrity culture in French politics.⁵²

⁵¹ Booba and his Piraterie following who have launched online harassment campaigns against journalists and public figures who have criticised Booba for example were in support of Benzema during the period of his ban.

⁵² Others, it should be noted, have argued that football – and several ‘bad-boys’ that I have referenced in this chapter – is a bridge to a form of racialisation which they see as a discourse of racial exclusivism antithetical to an inclusivist antiracist model (Brohm et al. 2021).

For all the hard work and renewed openness to collective effort, what Benzema's ultimately unsuccessful national team comeback demonstrates beyond his commitment to football and talent is that while Benzema clearly needs France, France too needs Benzema. Their destinies are linked. The inter-generational trauma of the French–Algerian war, and imperial trauma more broadly, has conjured the representation of two incommensurable Frances – that of *la France des Gaules* (the France of the Gauls) and *la France basanée* (dark France, used as code for northern and western Africans, often nominally Muslim). But Karim Benzema in terms of his *quartier* persona is a significant national export, particularly in his fusion of hip-hop, stand-up, Islam and football. In a climate in which racialisation and high-profile sport has become a society-wide subject of reflection since the retirement of Zidane, France and its *quartiers* need patrons and role models who do not 'sell out' – to speak with a wooden tongue (*langue de bois*) in the French vernacular – and who continue to hold to multiple sites of belonging – regional (Lyon, Bron), national (the FFF) and diasporic (Algeria). Indeed, rather than needing Benzema, perhaps his whirlwind mix of sporting prowess, semi-pious and somewhat public Islam, self-confidence, local solidarity, love for Algeria and overt masculinity are simply a reflection of the lives, hobbies and passions of an increasingly mixed French population that unlike the noisy far right can see plural *cultures des quartiers* in all of their human fragility: simultaneously superb and flawed.

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