

## Football Players' Migrations: a Political Stake

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**Abstract:** Based on sources from FIFA archives, Zurich, the article analyses footballers' migration as a political stake from the interwar period to the post-colonisation times. Four examples are selected to study this sometimes-neglected angle of the professional sport elite moves. The first one illustrates how the migration of football players fit in with the general policy of "race" and of national prestige in Fascist Italy. The second and the third example consider football players as sports figures representing political refugees and other persons in exile; it deals with the case of the Basque team during the Spanish civil war and the case of Hungarian refugees in the first half of the fifties. The last example, of Mobutu's Zaire, demonstrates that the question of sports migration could also serve as a revelation of North-South relations during the sixties.

From the very start of the twentieth century, the question of football players' geographical movements and their regulation constituted a major subject of concern for the leaders of European football federations. As the correspondence exchanged between two founding fathers of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), Robert Guérin and Carl A. W. Hirschman, shows, it was a question of preventing "whether it be individual players or local clubs and associations, to play simultaneously, and in the same year, in different national federations".<sup>1</sup> Thus, the intention was to maintain the national character of football organization and to prevent the untimely movement of certain "orbiting" players. Although this principle seemed to be in contradiction with the cosmopolitan and transnational character of the beginnings of continental football,<sup>2</sup> it was confirmed in the first statutes of FIFA, which in 1904 expressed the will to develop matches *between nations* and to create a

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<sup>1</sup> Letter by Robert Guérin to C. A. W. Hirschman, 12 April 1904, reproduced in *Fédération Internationale de Football Association 1904-1929* (The Hague: 1929) 148.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Lanfranchi and Matthew Taylor, *Moving with the Ball. The Migrations of Professional Footballers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001) 32-33.

European championship in the long term. The Great War reinforced this “Westphalian order” of football. International sport, as Eric Hobsbawm remarked, became “an expression of national conflict, and the sportsmen representing their nation or their state, primarily expressions of their imagined community”.<sup>3</sup>

However, this tendency to take the nations’ interests into account was challenged by the process of professionalisation. For professionalism was not limited to the indigenous players; it also addressed the best foreign elements, in particular the football players from Central Europe, who were attracted by the more favourable economic conditions offered in the west of the continent, first in Italy, then in France. Consequently the migration of professional players accompanied the creation of elite contests. Gradually it constituted a financial stake, while also taking on a political character insofar as the best footballers became the symbols of a nation and its “race”.

It is thus the encounter of these two aspects of modern football, national identity instrumentalised by the state and the financial stakes induced by rich clubs, that made the migration of football players a major political issue in international sports relations. Because of the supposed political neutrality of the federal authorities, these questions were treated in an indirect way by FIFA and the national associations, as the shadow of the authoritative and totalitarian states was always there as a background to their decisions.

Three examples allow us to study, from a sometimes neglected angle, the political issues involved in the migration of top-level football players. We will first illustrate how the migration of football players fit in with the general policy of “race” and of national prestige in Fascist Italy. Then, we will consider football players as sports figures representing exiles or political refugees, dealing with the case of the Basque team during the Spanish civil war and the case of Hungarian refugees in the first half of the fifties. Lastly, we will see that the question of sports migration could also serve to highlight North-South relations during the sixties, with the example of this case study is Mobutu’s Zaire.

### Sports Immigration and “Race Policy”: the Case of the *rimpatriati* in the Period of Fascism

Whereas it had previously provided a large number of immigrants to France and the two Americas, Italian emigration declined in the period between the two world wars. The restrictions and limitations imposed on immigration by certain states as well as the militia of the Fascist regime even led to the return of two million emigrants and migrant workers employed abroad.<sup>4</sup> The regime also wanted to strengthen the bonds with the expatriate Italian communities.

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations et nationalisme depuis 1780* (Paris: Folio Histoire, 2001) 264.

<sup>4</sup> Klaus J. Bade, *L’Europe en mouvement* (Paris: Seuil, 2002) 328.

This wish was already expressed in a law of June 13, 1912, claiming “to preserve the feeling of Italianity” of the emigrants. The law established that “the Italian nationality, transmitted by the right of blood, [can only be lost] by a voluntary act” and that “the [disclaimed] Italian nationality following the spontaneous acquisition of a foreign nationality [was] recovered in the event of a return to Italy”.<sup>5</sup> There was no question that these provisions were maintained under Mussolini.

This legal framework did not only correspond to the desire of Fascism to promote the “Italian race”, it was also favourable to the world of football which was then in full expansion. The desire to forget the first World War, the force of the regional identities as well as the intervention of industrialists such as Edoardo Agnelli, son of the founder of FIAT<sup>6</sup> – all this made football move towards professionalism. This turn was officially approved by the Viareggio Charter. This Charter prohibited the use of foreign players.<sup>7</sup> This was a problem, as professionalism did not only involve the best transalpine players but also players originating from Central Europe, for example, the Hungarian Ferenc Hirzer who was employed by Juventus of Turin at the beginning of the season 1925-1926. The Viareggio Charter cut off this source of supply.<sup>8</sup>

However, the door remained open for the *rimpatriati*, the descendants of Italian emigrants in South America who had distinguished themselves in the Argentinean, Uruguayan and Brazilian teams. In the South American countries, *fútbol* had been one of the most effective instruments of nation-building starting from a massive and multinational immigration. Uruguay’s success at the Olympic Games in 1924 and 1928 as well as the virtuosity of the Argentinean players made it possible to create a national identity through specific national styles of football.<sup>9</sup> These characteristics did not escape the attention of the Italian recruiters who, with the blessing of the Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio (FIGC) and the political authorities, turned to South America to seek stars capable of raising the crude technical level of players at home. On the whole more than 118 Italian descendants arrived in Italy from 1929 to 1943 to make their talent pay in the motherland’s series A and B clubs.<sup>10</sup> The most

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<sup>5</sup> Ferruccio Pastore, “Droit de la nationalité et migrations internationales: le cas italien”, *Nationalité et citoyenneté en Europe*, eds. Patrick Weil and Randall Hansen (Paris: La Découverte, 1999) 95-117.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Dietschy, “Une passion urbaine: football et identités dans la première moitié du vingtième siècle. Le cas de Turin et de l’Italie”, *Histoire urbaine* 3 (June 2001): 133-148.

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Papa and Guido Panico, *Storia sociale del calcio. Dai club dei pionieri alla nazione sportiva (1887-1945)* (Bologne: Il Mulino, 1993) 162-163.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Dietschy, “Football et société à Turin 1920-1960”, diss., Université Lumière-Lyon II, 1997, 104.

<sup>9</sup> On the creation of the Argentinean identity via football, see Eduardo P. Archetti, “Masculinity and football: the formation of national identity in Argentina”, *Game without Frontiers. Football, identity and modernity*, eds. Richard Giulianotti and John Williams (Aldershot, 1994) 225-243.

<sup>10</sup> Lanfranchi and Taylor 83.

gifted of them became stars whose aura was quite comparable to the native players: the Argentinean Raimundo Orsi by becoming the best paid football player in Italy,<sup>11</sup> his compatriot Cesarini by his speciality of scoring in the last minutes of a match (which still remains the *zona Cesarini* in the male culture and memory of the peninsula). In this manner, the *rimpatriati* contributed their share to the construction of the consensus in Italy in the first half of the thirties as identified by the historian Renzo De Felice. Although their exploits and life styles did not always comply with the norms of the Fascist order,<sup>12</sup> they gave substance to the single pool championship first played during the 1929-1930 season. Appearing at the wheel of their car or on the Tyrrhenian coast in *Il Calcio illustrato* magazine, against the backdrop of the futurist architecture stadiums such as the Berta in Florence or the Mussolini in Turin, they embodied the “Taylorization of leisure” as described by Victoria De Grazia: a mass entertainment and the transmission of pictures of modernity via a modernized press and the celebration of the body.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond a more or less disguised propaganda in the sports press that served the purpose of institutions such as the Fascist leisure organisation Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, the best South American players also played an essential role in the world title won by the *squadra azzurra* in 1934. In front of the Duce in person Orsi scored one of the two goals of the victory against Czechoslovakia, whereas another Italian from Argentina, Monti, did the “housework” in the middle of the field. However, the welcome offered to these *rimpatriati* involved some contradictions. Had the press not pointed to Raimundo Orsi pledging his allegiance to Italianity in Spanish, when he arrived in Genoa in October 1928, and by affirming that he was very happy to have returned to the motherland, although he was “rather popular in Argentina”?<sup>14</sup>

More serious than these incidents the Ethiopian war was a test of the patriotic feelings of the players coming from the southern hemisphere. Orsi, for example, returned to Argentina in April 1935, after having asked for the approval of the club and the FIGC, which made it possible to affirm that it was not “about a rather unfortunate defection [at] this moment”.<sup>15</sup> But other young Italians from South America, among them Scopelli, Stagnaro and Guaita who were in the age to march on Addis-Abeba, “had left Italy and broken their

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<sup>11</sup> According to *Il Calcio illustrato* 24 April 1935, the Juventus of Turin paid Orsi more than 7 000 liras per month, i.e. seven times the salary of an Italian judge.

<sup>12</sup> Libonatti lived it up during his return trip to Argentina in 1938, his teammates had to contribute to pay his passage on the steamer. Sergio Barbero, *Granatissimo. I 35 grandi del Toro* (Turin: Graphot Editrice, 1990) 13.

<sup>13</sup> Victoria De Grazia, *The culture of consent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>14</sup> A colloquio con Orsi l'italo-argentino della “Juventus”, in *La Stampa* 4 October 1928.

<sup>15</sup> Orsi torna in Argentina, in *La Stampa* 4 April 1935.

contracts”.<sup>16</sup> Stopped at the border in order to hand over their convocation for a military medical visit,<sup>17</sup> they thus illustrated the limits of a sports immigration policy in which the lure of profit was vastly more important than the feeling of membership of the Italian nation or adhesion to the values of Fascism.

However, in spite of these annoying desertions, the goal was reached: the level of Italian football progressed considerably and in June 1938 Italy won a second world title in Paris, on the playing field of a democratic nation considered to be in decline and a soon-to-be enemy – thanks to a team primarily made up of native players. It was a victory for both Fascism and the “razza”.

## From *no passaran* to *I chose liberty*: Football Exiles and Refugees

### The Case of Spain

The period between the two world wars also saw the development of football in another large Latin country: Spain. From June 1924, professional football was legalised<sup>18</sup> and the “people’s game” entered the age of crowds. Actually, the Spanish team was considered to be one of the most respected sides in Europe and included one of the stars of world football: the goalkeeper Ricardo Zamora. It was thus a thriving show firmly implanted in urban mass culture that was politicised and radicalised by the military rising of July.

As of August 8, 1936, the Spanish Federation of *fútbol* was purged and henceforth directed by people “unconditionally faithful to the established rule and to the policies of the *frente popular*”.<sup>19</sup> In opposition to this republican football, the nationalists created the Real Federación Nacional de España<sup>20</sup> in the conquered territories on October 17, 1937. From then on football became a propaganda tool with a double dimension, internal and external, as was the case of the civil war itself. Firstly, even though the majority of the large clubs, except the FC Barcelona, joined the pro-Franco camp, the Basque teams, at least before the surrender in the summer of 1937, remained faithful to the republican

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<sup>16</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Correspondence with National Associations: Argentina 1934-1968, Letter from Ivo Schrickler to the affiliated national associations, 30 September 1935.

<sup>17</sup> Antonio Ghirelli, *Storia del calcio in Italia*, new edition (Turin: Einaudi, 1990) 145.

<sup>18</sup> Félix Martialay, *Implantacion del profesionalismo y nacimiento de la liga* (Madrid: Real Federación Española de Fútbol, 1996) 40-47.

<sup>19</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Correspondence with National Associations: Spain 1935-1970, Copy of a letter from José Maria Mengual Febrero, President of the Executive Committee of the Spanish Association, to the President of the Basque Federation, 8 August 1936.

<sup>20</sup> Real Federación Española de Fútbol 1913-1988, the official book on the 75 years of the Association (Madrid: Real Federación Española de Fútbol, 1988) 70.

cause.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, the government and the Basque football federation organized a propaganda tour by a “representative team” in Western Europe in April 1937.<sup>22</sup>

After having played matches in Czechoslovakia and France, the Basque players left for Latin America in order to continue their tour. Consequently, their position changed: from that of travelling football players supporting a noble cause, they became exiled, stateless people whom the pro-Franco federation tried to make return. They were exiled, as their homeland had been occupied by the nationalist troops during the summer and was subjected to a harsh repression.<sup>23</sup> They were stateless, at least at the sports level, under the terms of a decision taken by the Executive Committee of FIFA to prohibit “all meetings with the Spanish teams until further notice”.<sup>24</sup> Facing this new but characteristic case of the “century of the refugees”,<sup>25</sup> the world football federation had to face the rigour of its rules while following the narrow path of political neutrality in sports. “Prompted by a feeling of humanity and benevolence towards this team and to allow it to find the means of returning to Europe”, it first granted the authorization “to play four matches [in] Mexico”.<sup>26</sup> Then in September 1938, confronted with the determination of the Basque players not to return to Spain, FIFA’s Urgency Committee lifted the injunction of the players “under the condition that these players submit their adherence to a FIFA association within four weeks”.<sup>27</sup> Finally, only two of about thirty players returned to their country.<sup>28</sup> Mexican and Argentinean teams enrolled the others. Some of them became stars of national championships while being at the same time political refugees and economic immigrants.

### The Case of Hungary

While the Basque players fled Spain, some famous Hungarian football players moved in the opposite direction. Like Spain, Hungary was a big football nation. In the period between the world wars, football was a means of consolidating the national identity of a country that had lost a about one third of its territory

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<sup>21</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Correspondence with National Associations: Spain 1935-1970, Documents showing the legality of the Assembly meeting in San Sebastian and containing the agreements made in the same city, accompanied by a memo addressed to the FIFA, 7 September 1937.

<sup>22</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Letter from Ricardo Cabot to Jules Rimet, 6 April 1937.

<sup>23</sup> Guy Hermet, *La guerre d’Espagne* (Paris: Points-Seuil, 1989) 296-297.

<sup>24</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Correspondence with National Associations: Spain 1935-1970, Letter from Ivo Schricker to Ricardo Cabot, 4 July 1937.

<sup>25</sup> Bade 345.

<sup>26</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Correspondence with National Associations: Spain 1935-1970, Letter from Schricker to the Federation of San Sebastian, 27 December 1937.

<sup>27</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Letter from Schricker to the Federation of San Sebastian, 13 September 1938.

<sup>28</sup> Lanfranchi and Taylor 87.

and faced serious economic and social difficulties. There was even a new Hungarian national style in football: artistic and fierce; it was supposed to express “Magyarity”.<sup>29</sup> This heritage was not lost in the period of the Stalinist regime of Mátyás Rákosi (1948-1953). In 1952, the Hungarian national team won Olympic gold in Helsinki, then inflicted two searing defeats on the English football champions,<sup>30</sup> before only just missing the world title in 1954.

As a consequence, the migrations of Hungarian footballers had strong media and political repercussions in these times of East-West tension. These departures towards the “imperialistic camp”, to use a Jdanovienian expression, started and came to light by the Kubala affair. In January 1949, Laszlo Kubala, one of the best players of the Budapest Vasas crossed the border to take refuge in Austria’s American occupation zone. After a journey through Italy he arrived in Spain where FC Barcelona immediately enrolled him, before being naturalized and wearing the shirt of the Spanish national team. Disqualified for life by his original federation but defended against the international rules by the Iberian association, Kubala became the symbol of the abuse of authority for one side, of freedom for the other. In order to prevent the defector from playing on the pro-Franco fields, the Hungarian authorities did not hesitate to bring him to court for fraud, whereas his old club denounced his amoral and anti-social character to the FIFA. Thus, he had lived “an unsportive life, with depraved habits” and left his country, his club and his parents, “without any work or material support”.<sup>31</sup>

Obviously, the pro-Franco sports authorities were not of the same opinion. For the Spanish federation, the case of Kubala was primarily political and was an example, along with so many others, of communist oppression. The player had chosen to escape to the “free world” in order to escape an “imminent threat of death”.<sup>32</sup> All things considered, to let Kubala play was equivalent to respecting “human rights”. Although there cannot be any doubt about Kubala’s wish to escape from “the terrifying dictatorship of the Communist Party”,<sup>33</sup> the two opposing camps avoided a fundamental question. Indeed, as FIFA president Jules Rimet expressed it: “Nobody has put forth the assumption that Kubala, a

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<sup>29</sup> Miklos Hadas, “Stratégie politique et tactique sportive: esquisse d’une analyse socio-historique du style de jeu de l’équipe d’or hongroise des années cinquante”, *Football jeu et société*, eds. Henri Héral and Patrick Mignon, *Les cahiers de l’INSEP* 25 (1999): 96.

<sup>30</sup> The English national team was soundly beaten 6-3 at Wembley (London) in November 1953 and then 7 to 1 at the Nepstadium in Budapest the following May.

<sup>31</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Affaires de joueurs, Kubala, Laszlo, copy and translation of the State Attorney’s indictment against Laszlo Kubala and his mother, 22 May 1950; FIFA Archives Zurich, Letter from Hermann Bela for the secretary of the Vasas club to the FIFA, 16 September 1952.

<sup>32</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Letter from Manuel Valdès, President of the Spanish Football Federation to the FIFA, 24 September 1951.

<sup>33</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Letter from Laszlo Kubala to Jules Rimet, 15 December 1951. The choice of vocabulary must be taken seriously, particularly if you read François Fejtő, *1956 Budapest, l’insurrection* (Bruxelles: Complexe, 1981) 46-57.

player of recognized quality, simply left his country to gain advantages of a material nature that he was sure of obtaining abroad".<sup>34</sup> In other words, the figure of the footballer-refugee was much more complex than the "verbiage which [was] a part of the style of autocratic regimes, whether they [were] communist or fascist".<sup>35</sup> If the call for freedom seemed authentic, there was also the desire of elite professional players who were increasingly sought after, to take advantage of the high wages paid in the championships in Spain or Italy.

Consequently, the Kubala case was regarded as characteristic of a state of mind that one found again when, under dramatic circumstances in 1956, 240 Hungarian players<sup>36</sup> from the first and second divisions fled their country following the crushing of the Budapest insurrection by the Red Army. On that occasion, the entire Honved team defected and its best players such as Puskas, Czibor and Kocsis went to fill the ranks of the major Spanish clubs. The bitterness of exile was thus partly cushioned by the material and sporting successes made possible by Santiago Bernabéu, the President of Real Madrid, and others.

### The Case of Zaire

Although sporting excellence as regards the most popular ball game remained the prerogative of the European and South American continents, the talents of the African football players started to awaken the curiosity of professional clubs from the 1950s. Football had been introduced to Africa just before the First World War. From the thirties, France, a pioneering country in this matter, integrated players from its colonies in its best teams, even in its national team.<sup>37</sup> However, it is only after the Second World War, that the European championship began to act as an incentive to woo away significant numbers of African players who sometimes became, as in the case of Rachid Mekloufi,<sup>38</sup> the stars of these matches.

Belgium, because of its bonds with Congo, did not escape this phenomenon. Introduced by the colonists to Léopoldville and Elisabethville about 1912, the practice of football was soon controlled by the Association Royale Sportive Congolaise (ARSC) founded in 1919 by the "Very Reverend Father" Raphaël

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<sup>34</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Affaires de joueurs: Kubala, Laszlo, Letter from Jules Rimet to doctor Munoz Calero, the Spanish member of the FIFA Executive Committee, 31 March 1954.

<sup>35</sup> Archives Zurich, Letter from Rodolphe W. Seeldrayers, Vice-President of the FIFA to Kurt Gassmann, General Secretary of the International Federation, 9 January 1952.

<sup>36</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Affaires de joueurs: Suspension des joueurs hongrois 1957. Figures supplied by Kurt Gassmann in a letter to the President of the FIFA, Arthur Drewry, 1 May 1957.

<sup>37</sup> Lanfranchi and Taylor 170-172.

<sup>38</sup> Pierre Lanfranchi, "Mekloufi. Un footballeur français dans la guerre d'Algérie", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 103 (1986) 7-30.

de la Kethulle de Ryhove. The game was thus integrated in the Belgian project of colonization, as these words written in 1945 testify: “To colonize, is to civilize. The school of sport is also a part of civilization such as we understand it”.<sup>39</sup> However, hidden behind this colonial paternalism there was a less happy reality, closer to the pitiless exploitation in place since the time of Léopold II. Actually, as of the fifties, certain Congolese players started to attract the attention of European recruiters, in particular the Portuguese from Angola. The negotiations over their transfers made it possible to lift the veil on the sporting practices of the colonizers. Thus, when the Congolese player Mokuna accepted an offer of transfer by Sporting Lisbon, the ARSC initially vetoed it.

The ARSC claimed a compensation for the departure of the player<sup>40</sup> although, as some native players explained to Jules Rimet, the Congolese footballers were neither paid, nor even insured, so that playing accidents had dramatic consequences for local sportsmen. Consequently, the plaintiffs concluded: “But we see that the rules don’t care about our fate, maybe it is because we are black. But we believe that we also have several of our brothers of colour in France, America etc... and who are not subject to the same treatment as us”. Even if a *nihil obstat* was finally granted to Makuna, football thus appeared to apply the same iron law of wages as the Belgian colonial economy, marked by the hounding of the native labour in the period between the wars or, later, the exploitation of the black proletariat by the mining companies.<sup>41</sup> It is therefore not a surprise that the emigration of players, to Belgium this time, became a particularly thorny question once independence had been acquired, in particular under “Marshal” Mobutu.

As in the majority of the African countries, a “real mystique of football”<sup>42</sup> contributed to ensure a hypothetical national cohesion, while at the same time being used as an instrument of regional assertion.<sup>43</sup> It also took an aggressive turn with regard to the old colonial power. Indeed, from then on the Belgian clubs drew largely on the Congolese breeding ground to recruit cheap players. As the elite of the national sport was at stake the transfers became a political question, and from 1966, the departure of Congolese players was subject to a prior authorization by the “Haut Commissariat à la Jeunesse et aux Sports du

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<sup>39</sup> Victor Bouin, *Le livre d’or jubilaire de l’U.R.B.S.F.A.* (Bruxelles: Les Éditions Leclercq & De Haas, 1945) 491-493, quotation 498.

<sup>40</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Correspondence with National Associations: Belgium 1939-1970, Letter from Firmin Yenga to Jules Rimet, 23 October 1954.

<sup>41</sup> Auguste Maurel, *Le Congo de la colonisation belge à l’indépendance* (Paris: fL’Harmattan, 1992) 130-131, 172-173. Quotation: FIFA Archives Zurich, Correspondence with National Associations: Belgium 1939-1970, Telegrams from the Belgian Federation to the FIFA, 14 December 1954.

<sup>42</sup> Hélène d’Almeida-Topor, *Naissance des Etats africains* (Florence: Casterman-Giunti, 1996) 63.

<sup>43</sup> See for example the case of Congo-Brazzaville: Patrice Yengo, “Le football africain entre passion nationale et sentiments ethniques : le cas du Congo”, *Tumultes* 9 (1997): 205-219.

Gouvernement Central”.<sup>44</sup> Thus, “Congo [expected] to make sure that the possible expatriation of its citizens did not harm the higher interests of the country”. Until the beginning of the seventies, the relations between the Belgian and the Congolese federations were strained by disagreements about transfers. On one side, the Belgian clubs sought to attract the best Congolese at bargain rates, on the other, the sporting authorities of the future Zaire repatriated the national players operating in “the flat country”, by transforming the temporary convocation for a selection to the national team into a definite return, without the payment of any indemnity. In a way the policy of nationalization of the players preceded the “Zairianisation” of foreign companies in 1973.<sup>45</sup> Thus, in a demagogic way and without any respect for personal freedom, the Mobutu regime, by the intermediary of a nationalized federation, took care to protect the national wealth by placing football players, copper and diamonds on the same level. This was commented by FIFA general secretary Helmut Käser as follows: “I do hope that the Fédération Congolaise de Football will realize that it is necessary to distinguish between the membership of a sports federation and the rights of a citizen of any given country”.<sup>46</sup>

This protectionist policy finally culminated in December 1973. The “leopards”, as the Zairean national team was nicknamed, succeeded in getting the single place reserved for Africa in the final contest of the World Cup played in the Federal Republic of Germany, a performance qualified as a “day of glory for the Republic of Zaire”.<sup>47</sup> However, they were eliminated without glory in the first round, beaten by nine goals in the game against Yugoslavia. The sports “Mobutism” thus showed its limits while at the same time the regime started to be destabilized by recurring political and economic crises. The monitoring of the players then became a secondary issue but the intransigence of the Congolese federation had created a new interest in African players by especially Belgian and French recruiters.<sup>48</sup> If the word “trade” is a little strong to qualify these migratory movements, the profits certain intermediaries and European clubs made by the resale of players imported at low cost strongly remind us of the foundations of the colonial economies.

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<sup>44</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Correspondence with National Associations: Congo Kinshasa, 1960-1983, Letter from Victor N’Joli, General Secretary of the Fédérations des Associations Sportives du Congo to the Fédération belge de football, 2 March 1966.

<sup>45</sup> Elikia M’Bokolo, *L’Afrique au XXe siècle. Le continent convoité* (Paris: Points-Seuil, 1985) 219.

<sup>46</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Correspondence with National Associations: Belgium 1939-1970, Letter from Helmut Käser to the Belgian federation, 20 January 1970.

<sup>47</sup> FIFA Archives Zurich, Correspondence with National Associations: Congo Kinshasa, 1960-1983, Telex from the Zairean Federation to the FIFA, December 1973.

<sup>48</sup> Lanfranchi and Taylor 182-183.

## Conclusion

Tackling the question of professional players' migrations thus appears to be a valid approach to judge the political dimension of football. Through its mobilising and representative function, the most popular ballgame in the world has been a showcase for nationalism and ideological conflict. In Fascist Italy the use of *rimpatriati* was a part of a policy to re-integrate the overseas Italians and to introduce gradually even autarky. In the same vein the South American stars were used by the propaganda to vaunt the virtues of the "Italian race" re-awakened by the Fascists. This was the contradiction of a sport that appears to be heavily marked by ideology although in reality it follows the logics of professionalism. To some extent the same can be said for the Hungarian and Spanish cases. Even though the Basque players defended the colours of the *Euskadi*, they nevertheless had to make a living in a situation where the chances of making a career in Spain were low due to the civil war. The same is true for Kubala whose decision to migrate was just as motivated by the wish to see his talent fully paid for in the Spanish championship as by the wish to escape the rigid control of Rákosi's totalitarian regime. Even though the context is different, the case of Mobutu's Congo shows the intensive politicisation of African football just after Independence. Football players were regarded as a foundation of nation and national wealth. They were an instrument of revenge against the old colonizer as well as part of the task of holding together the new nation state torn apart by conflicting ethnic groups.

Nowadays, the opening of the sports borders and the commercialisation of football that has occurred since its absorption by the "global village" do indeed make these protectionist sports policies outmoded. However, even if today the identity of football players is more defined by the clubs and the international brands that support them, the matches involving national teams still allow exiled sportsmen to be, for the duration of a World Cup, the heralds of a new type of nationalism inherited from the European model of the nation state.