

## “The White Man’s Burden”

*Football and Empire, 1860s–1919*

MODERN SPORTS start with European imperial expansion in the last two centuries. The agents of that imperialism played sports among themselves, but also saw sport as a tool of civilization. For example, British soldiers, sailors, traders, and government employees enjoyed football for their own entertainment, but they also saw it as pivotal in the European “civilizing mission” in Africa. Building on their experiences with youth and urban workers in industrial Britain, teachers and missionaries used this inexpensive, easy-to-learn fun to satisfy “the white man’s burden.” This expression, taken from Rudyard Kipling’s famous formulation, meant teaching African converts and colonial subjects about the virtues of Christianity, capitalist commerce, and Western civilization. In this opening chapter, I intend to show how the game of football arrived in Africa in the late nineteenth century through the major port cities and then began to spread into the interior by the 1920s by means of newly laid railway lines, Western-style schools run mainly by missionaries, and the colonial armed forces.

Africans, of course, had their own sports, but these activities were little esteemed by their new imperial masters. Sports such as wrestling, martial arts, footraces, canoe racing, and competitive dancing offer compelling evidence of how agrarian African societies embraced *Sportgeist*—the spirit of sport.<sup>1</sup> As the historians William Baker and Tony Mangan explain: “Throughout pre-colonial Africa . . . dances and games were long performed with a seriousness akin to sport in modern industrial societies, and for purposes not altogether different: the striving for status, the assertion of identity, the

maintenance of power in one form or another, and the indoctrination of youth into the culture of their elders.”<sup>2</sup> Indigenous sports were spectacles of fitness and physical prowess, technical and tactical expertise. Major competitions were community festivals with their rituals of spectatorship, including oral literary performances of bards (griots) and praise singers in honor of the athletes. Clearly, precolonial athletic traditions had much in common with Western sport. As such, they provided the “soil into which the seeds of [European] sport would be later planted.”<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, the first recorded football matches come from South Africa, where Europeans began settling nearly four centuries ago. The games involved whites in the Cape and Natal colonies. The record of this European sport seems to begin in 1862, when games between teams of soldiers and civil servants, between “home-born” (i.e., British) and “colonial-born” (i.e., South African) whites, were played at Donkin Reserve in Port Elizabeth and on the Green Point racecourse in Cape Town.<sup>4</sup> In 1866, “city” and “garrison” sides played in the Market Square in Pietermaritzburg, the capital of Natal colony. These early rough-and-tumble games featured elements of both rugby and soccer, which was not unusual because different forms of the game existed before the rules of association football were codified on October 26, 1863, in London. Devotees of the kicking game were soon referred to as “soccers” (an abbreviation of “assoc”), as opposed to “ruggers,” who played the handling game of rugby, the rules of which were devised in 1871.<sup>5</sup>

The influx of working-class British soldiers into southern Africa during colonial military campaigns against the Zulu state and the Afrikaners (mainly descendants of the Dutch and also known as Boers) inspired the founding of the first official football organizations in Africa. Pietermaritzburg County Football Club and Natal Wasps FC were formed around 1880 and the Natal Football Association in 1882. The whites-only South African Football Association (SAFA), founded in 1892, was the first national governing body on the continent. SAFA became the first member of FIFA on the continent in 1910.<sup>6</sup> Despite its colonial origins, soccer in South Africa by the 1920s would be increasingly perceived as a blue-collar, black sport, while rugby, cricket, and other middle-class sports such as tennis and golf became intimately linked to white power and identities.

### Looking around the Continent

In other parts of the continent, football’s early history was also connected to expatriate European colonizers. Between 1894 and 1897, for example,



FIGURE 1 “Dakar—a Football Match,” c. 1919 (*Alegi collection*)

French settlers in Oran (Algeria) channeled their sporting passion into the formal creation of a football club.<sup>7</sup> In Tunis there was enough interest in the game by 1906 to warrant the formation of Racing Club. The following year in Cairo saw the formation of Al Ahly, which initially included some Europeans but would become an all-Egyptian club in 1924—and a venue for anticolonial protest, as we will see. By 1913, French and other Europeans were playing regular matches in Dakar and Brazzaville, the capitals of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

The game was on an even firmer footing in the Belgian Congo, where a whites-only Ligue de Football du Katanga began in May 1911 in the copper-mining town of Élisabethville (today Lubumbashi).<sup>9</sup> Since only four teams competed in the 1925 B. Smith Cup—the Katanga championship—white football was limited in scope. In Léopoldville (Kinshasa), the capital, matches were taking place around 1912. By 1919–20, a formal association existed that later assumed the name Fédération de Football Association du Pool and affiliated with the Belgian football association in 1927. Much like colonists in other parts of Africa, the French, Flemish, Portuguese, and British in the Congo organized teams along the lines of European nationality. In the 1920s, a new championship against Brazzaville teams energized local football, which by this time had started to attract small sponsorships from private firms.

## Africans Take Hold of the Ball

The shared patriarchal assumptions of European and African cultures curtailed sporting opportunities for African women. Colonial racism also underpinned practices of domination and exclusion in African football and society. In the Congo, for instance, white teams enjoyed access to adequate playing facilities built with African taxes, a privilege not afforded to colonial subjects. Furthermore, racial segregation reigned at the grounds. Europeans occupied the more expensive and comfortable grandstand seats, while ordinary Congolese paid to stand around the pitch. Passions ran high in white football, with reports of violent incidents on and off the pitch appearing quite frequently in the records. Despite these trying conditions, African fans enjoyed watching different styles of play on display. They even assigned top white players nicknames, tangible proof of Africans' passion and active involvement in the sport through spectatorship.

The evidence from Francophone Africa was less unified. While the British rapidly introduced modern sport to sub-Saharan Africa after conquest, the French, along with the Belgians, Portuguese, and Italians, were considerably slower.<sup>10</sup> Two factors are relevant here. First, during the scramble for Africa and immediately after conquest, most European countries lacked a sporting culture comparable to that of Britain. A second consideration is that many Europeans "were less certain than their British rivals that modern sports created moral fiber along with muscle mass."<sup>11</sup>

These factors partly explain why in Francophone Africa few provisions were made for team sports before the Second World War. The focus, particularly in French territories, was more on expanding physical education programs in the schools, a policy made compulsory in 1923 in French West Africa.<sup>12</sup> Students at elite institutions like the École Normale William Ponty in Dakar, Senegal, which opened in 1918, played football and other games, but it was only in the 1930s and 1940s that French colonial administrators began to connect sport more explicitly to their self-ascribed *mission civilisatrice*.<sup>13</sup> Similar changes occurred in the Belgian Congo in the 1930s and 1940s, although the influence of the Catholic Church was stronger than in French-ruled territories due to the less rigid division between church and state. The Catholic rendition of muscular Christianity, encapsulated by the Latin phrase *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body), found a receptive audience among the Belgian authorities. As a result, in Léopoldville and Élisabethville, sports like football would gain favor

as a way “to provide civilized black youth with healthy distractions and to complete their physical and moral education at the school of discipline and endurance that the practice of sport entails.”<sup>14</sup>

In general, the arrival of football in Africa paralleled the global pattern of the game’s diffusion. It precisely followed the assertion of British commercial and imperial power. It was, of course, no accident that expatriates and local men played football in the major port cities of Barcelona, Genoa, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town, and Calcutta. These ports were important nodes in an increasingly connected world economy based on Western extraction of cheaply produced African, Asian, and American crops and precious metals and their conversion into manufactured goods for sale in international markets.

The importance of African coastal trading towns extended beyond the earliest areas of settlement such as South Africa and Algeria. In West Africa, for instance, British sailors are credited with making Cape Coast the birthplace of the game in the Gold Coast (the colonial name for what would become Ghana). At the turn of the twentieth century, Cape Coast was the colonial capital and thus “was home to a large number of British nationals and other European civil servants and company officials,” many of whom liked to play football in their free time.<sup>15</sup>

In Nigeria as well, the game arrived first in the port towns of Calabar in the east and Lagos in the west. Historian Wiebe Boer discovered that the first documented match in Nigeria was played on June 15, 1904, at the Hope Waddell Training Institution in Calabar, an elite school described in more detail below.<sup>16</sup> Hope Waddell students and staff members took the field against sailors from the HMS *Thistle*, which was docked in the harbor. Thanks in large part to Hope Waddell, the popularity of football grew rapidly in Calabar. The Beverley Cup, possibly the first organized soccer tournament in West Africa, was held there in 1906. In Lagos, Frederick Mulford, a British commercial agent, was instrumental in the game’s initial diffusion. He organized matches on the racecourse between teams of European traders, soldiers, and civil servants. But Mulford also invited Nigerian teams to play, and he even coached local school teams. Nigerian football enthusiasts referred to him as “Baba Eko,” meaning “Our Father” in the Yoruba language. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria’s first president (see chapter 3), provided a glimpse into how the British game was finding its way into the everyday lives of Africans around the time of the First World War. “We played football there with mango seeds, limes or oranges or old

tennis balls,” Azikiwe wrote in his autobiography. “Any collection of boys would be divided into two sides and a spirited game would ensue. We made and altered our rules to suit each game and so we emerged to become self-made soccerists.”<sup>17</sup>

A similar pattern unfolded in eastern Africa. In the late 1870s, football first came to Zanzibar island. European and Asian employees of the Eastern Telegraph Company, a huge British firm laying the submarine cable from Aden that would eventually reach South Africa, spent their evenings playing team sports.<sup>18</sup> Ordinary Zanzibari men of different ethnic and class backgrounds learned the game by watching and occasionally playing with the workers from overseas, as well as with students from St. Andrew’s College of the Universities’ Mission to Central Africa. By the 1910s, according to Khamis Fereji, the game had become a popular urban pastime.

Football started in *uzunguni* [Europe] but everyone here learned how to play. For a football we would buy a tennis ball; they were cheap in those days—for a few cents we could buy a ball. And then we would run off and play anywhere there was a little space. We played with each other in the narrow streets (*vichochoroni*) . . . or we would go over near the port. Before they had built the Public Works it was a big football ground. In the evening the men would come down and rest, enjoy the breeze, or fish and we kids would play football. This was the very beginnings of football, us kids playing in the narrow streets with our tennis balls.<sup>19</sup>

### Into the Interior: Railroads and the Armed Forces

Once football had filtered through Africa’s ports, it closely followed the path of railroads into the interior. Railroad lines were central to the development of colonial capitalism, as they connected the coast to the interior for the purpose of evacuating crops and minerals and transporting military forces to suppress anticolonial rebellions. Railway towns became important nodes of cultural transmission and exchange where football featured prominently. In the town of Atbara, headquarters of the Sudan Railways, the sport developed rapidly in the 1920s. According to historian Ahmed Sikainga, the British attempted to use sport to promote team spirit; football was “considered an essential ingredient for molding railway employees and helping them internalize the norms and values of the industry.”<sup>20</sup>



MAP 3 Africa's railroads, c. 1995. Map by Claudia K. Walters. Source: <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/images/map23.gif>.

One of the first documented examples of football in Yaoundé, the main city in central Cameroon, is illustrative of the importance of colonial railways in the history of football in Africa. In March 1927, as part of the festivities celebrating the arrival of the first locomotive from Douala, football matches were staged before large crowds. Representative sides from Douala and Yaoundé played in two racially segregated contests. First, Africans from Yaoundé defeated their counterparts from Douala; then the European teams played to a draw.<sup>21</sup> Many more examples could be made, but in the interest of brevity I will just point out that the development of railways in southern, central, and eastern Africa from the 1890s to the 1920s propelled the formation of numerous football clubs and associations in Southern and Northern Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe and Zambia), Congo, and Uganda.

In addition to the ports and railways, colonial militaries and police forces were important vectors for the spread of football in Africa.<sup>22</sup> At first, British army officers did not encourage football among the rank-and-file members of the Kenya African Rifles and Royal West African Frontier Force. For some time, games were “either viewed as part of soldiers’ physical training programs or were so *ad hoc* as to amount to little more than knockabout evening football among off-duty soldiers.”<sup>23</sup> African servicemen generally played soccer informally, often barefoot and “with mixed results.” In the 1930s, however, support for the game grew in both the Kenya African Rifles and Royal West African Frontier Force. As British officers warmed to football (as well as track-and-field and boxing) as a means to enhance troops’ self-discipline, aggressive masculinity, and camaraderie, African soldiers enthusiastically participated in army championships and (in West Africa) even national competitions. By 1946, a British Army Physical Training Corps instructor was so impressed that he noted how, in the Gold Coast, “football creates great interest among the population and all matches are well attended. The spectators are sensibly critical and always show a knowledge of the game.”<sup>24</sup>

### Schools, Sport, and “Muscular Christianity”

The knowledge and practice of football owed much to the establishment of Western-style schools across the continent. British public schools (privately funded boarding institutions) provided a model for the educational training of an indigenous elite with the clerical and leadership skills needed for jobs in colonial administration. In nineteenth-century Britain, elite schools spawned a movement devoted to using sport for academic education and moral training. For middle- and upper-class reformers of the Victorian age, sport became a highly valued component of a broader program of rational recreation, and “muscular Christianity” aimed at producing disciplined, healthy, and moral citizens.<sup>25</sup> “Through sport, boys acquire virtues which no books can give them,” pontificated Charles Kingsley, a leading proponent; “not merely daring and endurance, but, better still, temper, self-restraint, fairness, honour, unenvious approbation of another’s success, and all that ‘give-and-take’ of life which stand a man in good stead when he goes forth into the world, and without which, indeed, his success is always maimed and partial.”<sup>26</sup>

Legions of colonial administrators and missionaries graduated from public schools and universities in Britain. These individuals brought with them to

Africa a deep commitment to the “games ethic,” the belief that sport forged physically strong, well-rounded men of sound moral character for imperial service.<sup>27</sup> Reverend J. E. C. Welldon, headmaster at Harrow (1881–95), stressed the significance of the sporting cult for British power abroad: “The pluck, the perseverance, the good temper, the self-control, the discipline, the co-operation, the esprit de corps, which merit success in cricket or football, are the very qualities which win the day in peace or war. . . . In the history of the British Empire it is written that England has owed her sovereignty to her sports.”<sup>28</sup>

Mission schools and government schools made sport into an important meeting ground for Western and indigenous cultures. Before 1930 less than 1 percent of the African population received secondary education. Nevertheless, students organized many of the first teams and competitions. In South Africa, for example, *kholwa* (Christian Africans) made up a significant portion of the membership of the earliest clubs.<sup>29</sup> Sport was a mainstay of the academic curriculum and the student experience at elite mission schools such as Adams College near Durban. Known as Amanzimtoti Training Institute before 1914, Adams was founded in 1849 by Congregationalist missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, based in Boston, Massachusetts. It had a reputation as one of the best schools in southern and central Africa. The Adams College football team, the Shooting Stars, was among the oldest and most prestigious African sides in Durban, having competed against outside opponents since the 1890s.<sup>30</sup> American Board missions had produced many of the earliest African clubs in Durban, such as Ocean Swallows of Umbumbulu (established in the 1880s), Natal Cannons of Inanda (1890s), and Bush Bucks of Ifafa (1902). Other mission schools, such as Healdtown, Lovedale, and St. Matthews in the Cape, also fielded football teams, though these schools were better known for their excellence in rugby and cricket.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, the Hope Waddell Training Institution in Calabar, a prestigious Presbyterian mission school for Nigerian boys and girls founded in 1895, gave birth to soccer in that colony. Rev. James Luke reportedly introduced the game in 1902, two years before the aforementioned documented match between the school and British sailors.<sup>32</sup> Best known for its large campus and strong programs in physical sciences and physical education, Hope Waddell produced about a third of Nigeria’s teachers through the 1930s and “provided early incubation for budding nationalist politicians,” including Nnamdi Azikiwe.<sup>33</sup> In Lagos, sport and physical education was part of the

curriculum at the Church Missionary Society Grammar School (founded in 1859) and at the Wesleyan High School (1878), much as it was later at King's College (1909) and Yaba Higher College (1934).

By the interwar years, the British authorities in Nigeria had incorporated sport as a core component of colonial education. This policy had gained further legitimacy with the publication in 1922 of Lord Lugard's treatise on indirect rule, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, in which the former governor-general of Nigeria endorsed sport and physical education in schools for the training of an African elite. "It is, of course, essential that playgrounds and gymnasias should be provided," Lugard wrote. "In Nigeria we have found that polo was a specially good game for the sons of chiefs and others who could afford it, while for other boys cricket, football, and 'athletics' bring the staff and pupils into close touch, and have the best effect in training character."<sup>34</sup> Nigerian students complied. "You had to play games, it was compulsory," remembered Raphael Shonekan, a former King's College student. "The games that used to draw a crowd was this inter-secondary school football match . . . between King's College and St. Gregory . . . and so games played a dominant part in the upbringing of Kings College boys. In fact one of the mottos of the school says, 'always play the game' which means you are always fair, honest and a good sportsman when you play."<sup>35</sup>

In 1903 in colonial Gold Coast, the Government Boys School at Cape Coast inspired the creation of the first local team. In a town with a small but growing football culture among the Europeans, it was not surprising that African students would prove to be among the first practitioners of the sport. Having already launched cricket and tennis, Mr. Briton, a Jamaican headmaster, organized a football side for the students. According to one source, soon thereafter "the urge for the game spread beyond the confines of the school. A few boys from the Cape Coast township showed interest and soon it was decided to bring all of them together to form a club which Mr. Briton named *Excelsior*."<sup>36</sup> A quarter of a century later, "even academically weak students could be saved, nay, thrust into the limelight, by agility in sports and games" at the new Achimota College established in 1927 outside Accra.<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere in British West Africa, Fourah Bay College and the Church Missionary Society Grammar School in Freetown, Sierra Leone, also boasted sports programs. At the latter, "games were compulsory . . . we played cricket in the dry season, and football in the rainy season . . . there were competitions for the house shields in cricket, football, and athletics, including cross-country training."<sup>38</sup>

In Northeast Africa, Gordon Memorial College was singularly responsible for popularizing football in Sudan. Known among the British as the "Eton of the Sudan" and "Winchester by the Nile," this institution, like Fourah Bay, Achimota, and Makerere College in Uganda, emphasized vocational and technical training with a view to preparing students for government jobs. At Gordon, "character-building activities—sports first, and literary and social activities second—took up almost as much of the daily schedule as did classes."<sup>39</sup> Historian Heather Sharkey has shown that students played regular afternoon football matches while college staff organized intramural competitions that promoted team spirit and rewarded individual achievement with trophies and prizes. As we shall see in later chapters, Gordon alumni went on to form government departmental teams and, in the 1950s, took control of the Sudan Football Association—an example of both the role of Western schooling as a crucible for African nationalism and the resonance of football in the popular struggle against colonialism (see chapters 3–4).

In British-controlled eastern Africa in the 1880s, local students learned football in the schools in Zanzibar of Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA), run by young "muscular" Christians like Henry Good-year, whom a sports newspaper editor praised as a "splendid football player and so genial a man."<sup>40</sup> In 1887, the UMCA's jubilee celebrations closed with a "game of football played by the Kiungani boys in smart blue and white caps . . . with many thousands looking on."<sup>41</sup> By 1891, the school's daily routine regularly featured football and other sports. On the mainland, the Anglican G. L. Pilkington was another missionary who actively promoted soccer in the 1890s at a school in Mengo, Uganda. A few weeks before his death, Pilkington wrote: "We have started football lately. I play most afternoons. It is great fun and good for the boys." A visitor observed that Pilkington was "diligently coaching the boys . . . he enters with great earnestness into it. . . . I, with my boys and about ten others, stood Pilkington and another lot. We got two goals each. We play on a large grass field between Kampala and Rubaga."<sup>42</sup> Not all "muscular Christians" were men. For example, Marion Stevenson, a Scottish teacher at Tumutumu mission school in Kenya, embraced football to such an extent that, her biographer noted, "one might wax lyrical over the part that football has taken in attracting and educating the lads, and giving them an outlet for their energies, in place of fighting and bad dances."<sup>43</sup> At notable secondary schools like King's School in Budo, Uganda, Alliance in Kenya, and Tabora

("the Eton of Tanganyika"), one contemporary observed, "Christianity and games were only a part of the life of the school but were indeed its most important elements."<sup>44</sup>

A vignette from Kenya captures the extent to which British and other European colonizers believed football to represent the "stylized epitome of a moral order and the metaphoric essence of a cultured civilization."<sup>45</sup> In Central Province, missionaries taught Kikuyu and other local youths the game and in 1909 organized the first interschool cup. Teams from the Church of Scotland mission in Thogoto and the Church Missionary Society school in Kabete contested the trophy. John Arthur, a newly arrived missionary doctor, reported on this match in the *Kikuyu News* (without mentioning the final score). His evocative column, entitled "A Great Football Match," is worth quoting in full.

There was a goodly gathering of spectators, amongst whom were seen quite a number of highly painted warriors, relics of a day fast giving place to a new, in which the battlefields of spear and knife will give place to the playing fields of sport, in which manliness, courage, and unselfishness shall add their quota to the formation of true character. . . . It is our hope in these our games to stiffen the backbone of these our boys by teaching them manliness, good temper, and unselfishness—qualities amongst many others which have done so much to make many a Britisher, and which we hope to instill into our boys in such a way as to make them strong men indeed. Our belief is that our games may be, when properly controlled, a mighty channel through which God can work for the uplifting of this race. They need to be strengthened in the realm of their physical nature, where Satan so strongly reigns, and how better than by the substitution of their own evil dances by such a game as football, inherent in which are magnificent uplifting qualities.<sup>46</sup>

For Europeans like Arthur who were dutifully carrying out the "white man's burden," football was potent enough to keep the devil at bay and to provide a healthy and moral outlet for Africans' supposedly savage instincts. As the consolidation of colonial rule took root in the first two decades of the twentieth century, football gained a central place in African education and in the development of a new culture that bridged "traditional" and modern, rural and urban, and indigenous and Western worldviews and experiences.

Needless to say, Africans were not simply duped into adopting Western sport: they enjoyed the game for their own reasons and on their own terms. As the next chapter shows, football was an attractive aspect of Western culture that Africans appropriated and deployed in different ways—and often for different purposes than those originally intended by European colonizers and capitalists.