



## Following the Ball: The Migration of African Soccer Players across the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1949-1975

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Following the ball: the migration of African soccer players across the Portuguese colonial empire, 1949-1975**, by Todd Cleveland, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2017, xiv + 266 pp., USD\$80.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-89680-313-8

**Football and colonialism: body and popular culture in urban Mozambique**, by Nuno Domingos, with foreword by Harry G. West, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2017, xvi + 325 pp., USD\$80.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-8214-2261-8

The study of football (soccer) history in Africa continues to gather pace since Peter Alegi in 2004 published the first academic monograph on the history of the sport in a single African country. His *Laduma!*<sup>1</sup> focussed on South Africa, the country that looms largest in the English language historiography of the game in Africa. However, there exists an emerging body of literature related to the history of football in Lusophone Africa, which both Todd Cleveland's *Following the Ball* and Nuno Domingos' *Football and Colonialism* enrich through compelling examinations of the influence of football beyond the pitch in Portugal and its colonial empire in Africa. The two texts differ in their spatial unit of analysis. Cleveland's *Following the Ball* is the more expansive in geographical scope, befitting its concern with tracing the movement of African footballers from across a colonial empire that included Mozambique, Angola, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau, and Cape Verde Islands. In contrast, *Football and Colonialism* zooms in to explore the history of football between the late nineteenth century and the 1970s in Mozambique's Lourenço Marques, presently Maputo.

Domingos' work appeared originally in Portuguese in 2012 as *Futebol e colonialismo: Corpo e cultura popular em Moçambique*. In terms of sources, Domingos draws from archival research in Portugal and Mozambique as well as newspapers, magazines, and interviews with former star players and individuals with careers in sport in Lourenço Marques. Cleveland explores the migration of talented African football players to Portugal from 1949 to 1975, a turbulent period during which Portugal continued to resist international pressure to decolonize amidst colonial uprisings. Cleveland also consulted archives in Portugal, and combines this with digital archives, periodicals, newspapers, and sporting pamphlets. By conducting interviews with top players and coaches, both authors provide invaluable perspectives on the multiple sets of relationships and motivations that coloured the players' experiences.

The late colonial period figures centrally in both texts. In 1961, the so-called Portuguese Colonial War began with nationalist movement uprisings in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique. In addition to military measures, the Portuguese government responded with administrative policies designed to bond the colonies more closely to the metropole. This continued the government's rhetoric of *lusotropicalism*, a concept coined by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, which purported that Portugal could govern its empire without exploitation and conflict and build a harmonious society predicated on modernizing progress. Prior to 1961, the *indigenato* political system had created a legally segregated society that denied citizenship and rights to *indigenas* ('native') Africans. To promote its vision of colonial harmony, the Portuguese government set out a specific legal process of assimilation that included the adoption of Portuguese customs in every facet of life, such as education, language, religion, and personal associations. The government stressed a 'civilizing mission', although the colonial system did not actively promote the conditions that would allow Africans to achieve the status of *assimilado* (assimilated) and thereby gain the few special rights that the distinction conferred. In football, the government identified a vehicle through which a singular Portuguese identity could be promoted that papered over the racial and cultural divisions that stratified the empire. Star African

football players, such as Eusébio, allowed the government to emphasize the supposed success of the ‘civilizing mission’ and *lusotropicalism*.

*Football and Colonialism* sets out to use football to explore these developments within the context of Lourenço Marques. Organized thematically, it analyzes in particular the relationship between the expression of the game and modernizing institutions, competing styles of play throughout the city, the meshing of the supernatural world with the African game, and the influence of popular international professional teams in Lourenço Marques, among other topics. Domingos discusses how the general planning of the city followed the Portuguese ideal of a ‘civilized’ urban space with geometric, ‘rational’ designs that also physically separated Portuguese colonists who lived downtown from Africans subsisting on the fringe of the city in so-called suburban neighbourhoods. In Lourenço Marques, Africans played in suburban leagues that were a part of the *Associação de Futebol Africana* (African Football Association) and within which communal ties predominated, as did the development of networks with a common sporting identity. Downtown leagues, dominated by the settler controlled *Associação de Futebol de Lourenço Marques* (Lourenço Marques Football Association), served to harden racial and class exclusion by claiming resources, including facilities, coaches, and media coverage. However, the 1949 signing of Mário Wilson by *Sporting Clube de Portugal* and the 1951 signing of Matateu by *Clube de Futebol Os Belenenses* began to build common identities throughout the city and positioned Lourenço Marques as a top recruiting spot for future African stars.

Domingos details the developments of the game from an informal means of bringing people together in the city to a central leisure activity for men in particular. Suburban matches drew large crowds and featured players with great skill. Games also afforded an opportunity to gamble, further swelling their popularity. As the more established downtown leagues became more competitive, the best players from the suburban leagues would be recruited to play for the settler teams. These men exhibited a distinctive style of play. They also at times enlisted the aid of a *vovô* (someone responsible for witchcraft) to influence the result of the matches. Players testify that the practice of witchcraft provided a psychological benefit and Domingos reveals that it is frequently mentioned through narratives of the suburban game.

Football influenced the gestures and everyday movements of the people of Lourenço Marques. Domingos argues that the language and movements of football created what Pierre Bourdieu defines as a *motor habitus*, ‘a specific motor translation of trained bodily disposition during performative situations’ (14). Domingos uses this framework to explore the expressive negotiations that occurred through physical activity and to measure the popular aesthetics and local representations of the game. During the first half of the twentieth century, the Portuguese government promoted physical activities such as gymnastics. These were ‘useful and correct’ (44) while the movements of football were disparaged as ‘unhealthy, unpredictable, prone to conflict, hesitant, [and] filled with disordered actions’ (46). In the 1950s, José Craveirinha, a Mozambican poet and journalist, began actively promoting suburban Lourenço Marques football culture as ‘intelligent’, ‘cunning’, and ‘malicious’, and a celebrated example of the Africanization of Western customs. Terms took on new meanings within the city’s culture, for example, *beketela*, originally meaning to put away or tidy up, transformed to signify ‘the player who anticipates the opponent’s action and places his foot on the ball in such a way as to provoke a clash that quite often causes serious injury to the player who kicks it and almost always leads to his falling over’ (113). Craveirinha’s cultural descriptions of Lourenço Marques suggest the community was infatuated by football to the point where the language of the game influenced the language and culture of the city.

*Following the Ball* peers into the lives of elite African football players who left family and friends in Portugal’s colonial empire in order to play the game in the metropole. Cleveland begins with an overview of the development of football in Portuguese African colonies. He explores the African expressions of the sport, including makeshift balls and playing spaces, bare feet, performative spectators, and styles favouring ‘trickery, deception, feigning, and especially, creative dribbling’ (61). Cleveland’s interviews focus on the specific backgrounds, social environments, and opportunities for the individual players. Portuguese clubs were motivated to recruit African players to achieve international success. These players were engaged with the recruiting process and often made decisions based on various factors,

including educational opportunities, financial incentives, and club allegiance. Many players actively sought to play for *Académica de Coimbra*, the team associated with Portugal's *Universidade de Coimbra*, to achieve an education that provided them opportunities after football. Others pursued playing with *Companhia Uniao Fabril*, which offered post-football employment in industrial labour. Still others desired to play for the top tier teams, *Sport Lisboa e Benfica* or *Sporting Clube de Portugal*, which offered the largest salaries.

Cleveland also explores the challenges that many of the star players faced when moving from the colonies to the metropole. On the pitch, players had to adapt to grass surfaces and more rigorous training programmes. Off the pitch, they had to manage living in club-controlled housing, new opportunities for leisure and social relationships, and the financial freedom that came with being a professional football player. The players who Cleveland interviewed did not particularly remember experiencing overt racism in the metropole compared to more racist institutions developed in the colonies. Black players in Portugal were popular, perhaps due to their exoticism or celebrity status, with many of them securing positions as captains during their careers and afterwards as coaches. During the 1960s, the government increasingly considered football an important pillar of the Portuguese nation. Victories in European championships buttressed Portuguese nationalism and buoyed the nation in the face of dwindling economic growth. Top African players were increasingly recognized for their contributions, appearing publicly during state propaganda events and receiving medals from high-ranking state officials. This was all designed to perpetuate the image of a united and successful nation. However, this also meant that African players were limited in their freedom to play outside of Portugal, as the Portuguese government declared star players 'national assets'. Cleveland's interview with Eusébio sheds light on Portugal's decision to stop his transfer to Juventus Football Club in Italy, which could have made him the highest paid football player in the world.

Increased connections between government and football ran counter to many migrant football players' desires to remain apolitical. The players of *Académica* were the most heavily influenced by the nationalist student movements and deepening political consciousness, with four players eventually fleeing the country and foregoing their professional positions to take up arms to aid independence efforts in the colonies. The city of Coimbra, with a large activist student population, supported *Académica* football club. Its loss to *Benfica* in the 1969 Portuguese Cup may have 'saved the regime, as had [*Académica de*] Coimbra won, the victory likely would have grown into something larger and broader' (200). Star players, such as Eusébio, featured prominently in the Portuguese propaganda machine. Many served honorary positions within the Portuguese military and others became the public face of Portuguese inclusion and a model for integration. During the 1950s and 1960s, Portugal, as one of the largest importers of African football talent, faced international criticism over claims that its African players were not actually Portuguese. This caused additional hardships for star African players as they attempted to acclimatize to a new way of life in the metropole. International media outlets further politicized the debate by introducing African players during the 1966 FIFA World Cup according to their colonial birthplace. Eusébio regretted this, stating: 'I was born in Mozambique, it's true, but I was Portuguese. And I didn't like it because I never liked it when politics was mixed with football.' (190)

These two studies of Lusophone African football history help to fill a gap in the historiography of African sport. By taking a thematic approach to analysing how football mattered to different communities in Lourenço Marques, Domingos illustrates the impact of football on the organization and culture of the city. Domingos excels at exploring the conflicting, racially inflected narratives that surrounded football in Lourenço Marques. Domingos uses football as a way to study the shifting relationship between the colonies and the metropole as African players became celebrated Portuguese icons and 'quickly became increasingly recognizable symbols of a metropolitan popular culture' (196). Organized chronologically, *Following the Ball* outlines the development of football in the colonies and then traces the lives of successful African footballers as they navigate the challenges and opportunities in the metropole. Taken together, Cleveland and Domingos give a sense of what the game meant to people at both 'ends' – in the empire as well as the metropolitan centre. Both texts place the individual

athlete at the forefront of the discussion while adding importantly to our knowledge of football history in Portugal and across its African empire. In conclusion, I strongly endorse both books for anyone interested in the history of relationships between Portugal and the African stars that played an influential role in the nation's international success during the mid-twentieth century.

## Note

1. Alegi, *Laduma!*

## Bibliography

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