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Understanding African Footballers in Europe
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What do the Academics say?

Football is discussed by experts, former players and managers, but very rarely do we get to hear a studious approach.

It is here that he highlights how football emerged as a counter-cultural force which complimented not only the forces of urbanization and a growing African proletariat but a reclaiming of a sport which was originally introduced as part of the civilizing mission by the European colonial powers. Both adhere to the mobilization associated with working-class organising that in many African colonies was the origins of the independence movements which came about after the Second World War.

As historians have transcended the nation state, football has emerged as interesting foci but has somewhat struggled to shed the legacy of colonialism and this is nowhere more prevalent than in Africa. Global inequality existing within a capitalism system has meant that capital, labour, migration and Corporations present a meaningful approach to historicize football and understanding its place within these processes. We can place African footballer migration in the context of Wallerstein’s ‘World Systems Theory’. This approach where capitalism has brought about a centre of capitalist development which consists of the industrialized Western nations and a semi-periphery and a periphery which operate under uneven capitalist relations subservient to the former can be applied to the migration of African footballers from the periphery, to the semi-periphery. A journey which contains opportunities as well as risks.

By positing African football migration within the wider spectrum of global capitalism, academics have also examined what this means for foreign intervention in terms of NGO’s and the emergence of Football academies on the continent. Seen as attempts to shift the uneven relationship between Africa and Europe, these ventures have both a positive and negative impact in reference to their aims. Kate Manzo looked closely at two initiatives in her study, the first was ‘Football for Hope’ and a FIFA joint venture with the Guardian newspaper where they held a tournament and invested in projects on the continent. These examples provided a microcosmic view of how Football interacts with themes of global development. She highlighted how neo-liberal and neo-colonial development strategies cast a grey cloud over the good intentions these ventures possessed.
Manzo claims that ‘FIFA’s contemporary thinking on development in Africa reflects a fairly smooth transition from a neo-colonial mindset consistent with modernization theory to a neo-liberal understanding of social development and entrepreneurship’. Respected Football historian Paul Darby argues that the emergence of football academies present a clear neo-colonial process. Industrialized Western nations dominate the terms in which trade is conducted and football academies in Africa are a mere expression of this notion. Economically speaking, these academies are export-focused and can be seen to be ‘de-skilling’ Africa in the process.

To conclude my overview of this research, I found that the neo-colonial narrative is predominant in any academic or historical analysis of African footballers in Europe which may be seem like an easy conclusion to draw. However, it is difficult to say whether it is the inability to move away or a lack of motivation to detach from the colonial legacy on the part of academics. I feel it would be wise to attempt to move away from this as we can all agree that the neo-colonial narrative is an established notion and instead of attributing its role, we should be seeking solutions. Furthermore, I found that there was a large economic focus regarding the literature. There has been little attention given to the way in which African footballers in Europe and the processes associated with this phenomenon have resulted in cultural shifts. By analysing Football in this manner, we open opportunities to understand how the game’s influence transcends the economy and the playing field.
An historical survey of Football on the African continent

African SoccerScapes provides a brief but engaging survey of how football developed on the African continent. Alegi essentially uses football as an analytical lens through which to historicize the effect the game had upon the continent whilst retaining a narrative that stresses the prominent and lasting influence Africa has had, and is having, upon the game.

The book interacts with a wide range of themes, stretching from football’s very introduction to colonial Africa. Considered a valuable educational tool in the civilizing mission, where football travelled along the railway networks enabling the movement of colonialism into the hinterland of Africa. From here, football undertook a seemingly African character from its linkages with growing urbanization and its organizational nature grew via the native civil servants present in the colonial administration.

fostering Pan-African tendencies through the creation of the CAF. Finally, with football becoming big business, Alegi shows how the globalizing nature of the game has fostered both positives and negatives for African football. These including increased privatization, greater organizational involvement and a larger section of aspiring African footballers creating a migratory pattern to Europe in search of opportunity.

The second theme is the emergence of the CAF and African membership of FIFA, alongside the privatization of the game and the way in which the larger institutional bodies present within African football have taken the game in specific directions and laid the foundations to globalize African football for both the better and for the worse. This posits football as a double edged sword, the increasing growth of football as an industry has seen sizeable benefits for Africa but the consistent neo colonial narrative continues as the majority of these benefits
for Africa but the consistent neo colonial narrative continues as the majority of these benefits are seen to leave Africa, from the players to the fans focus on European rather than local football. The grassroots game has considerably suffered in the face of globalization. The only real positive has been the development of private football academies which aim to provide schooling, board and football education to young boys. However, there is still a prominent European influence in these ventures with the final goal of exporting the best footballers to Europe. Moreover, this double edged sword presents itself most obviously in the overall theme of this magazine. Young aspiring African footballers are the most vulnerable piece of this puzzle, existing as a source of labour which risks monetizing footballing ambition. For every Michael Essien there are hundred other young African men who fall victim to the exploitation of their dreams and aspirations.

Alegi provides a great overview of the history of the game on the African continent and demonstrates the consequence this history has played in the emergence of the modern game we all love. Furthermore, he highlights the growing institutional role now that football has become widely globalized and the ramifications this has had for African players pursuing their footballing dreams.

Title: African Soccerscapes: How a continent changed the world’s game
Author: Peter Alegi
ISBN: 9781849040389
Reviewed by: Jake White
Who runs Football?

This article contains an analysis of the politics of football or the lack of it. On the one side you have the famous (international) football organizations, like the FIFA, UEFA, FIFPRO, and on the other side the international politics, needs to have its saying on this topic. With that part of the article you can think of organizations like EU, AU and the UN. Of course, the topic of this magazine, the migration of young African footballers is part of an analysis of the politics of football.

To start with, James Esson sees two ways of response you can have on irregular football migration. Firstly, the politics can create stronger regulation on international transfers between football clubs. Secondly, the standards of African football should be improved. The first proposal is more top-down, and the second one can defined as bottom-up. Nevertheless, it is hard to speak about those kind of structures within the football world. For an 'FIFA-bobo' the football world is a lot broader than for a young African footballer who cannot plan his future. So, it seems to be that the responsibilities for change lie with the ‘FIFA-bobo.’

What about FIFA?

FIFA, the organization which I mentioned earlier, was founded in Paris in 1904. As Darby describes: ‘The foundations of the FIFA were deeply embedded with Eurocentrism.’ Under President Stanley Rous (1961-1974) FIFA became even more idealistic. By then they saw football as a vehicle of modernity and fair play was an attribute and value of modern societies. Imagine yourself that a lot of African countries were decolonizing at that time. Those new nation-states were never able to fit in FIFA-ideals back then. After the election of Joao Havelange (1974-1998) as President of FIFA, FIFA received some ‘Third World Solidarity.’ Not in the first case, because Havelange, the same with Sepp Blatter and Gianni Infantino needed the support of those countries. In the recent years, FIFA also assisted in UN and NGO health care-programs. The question is whether FIFA really changed its vi-

Directly speaking, FIFA did two important proposals which influenced the situation of young African footballers. The positive program was founded in 2001, and was formulated as a ‘protection of minors.’ Starting from that year, only football players of eighteen year or elder can be transferred to another country, unless the parents were accompanying the player. In case of the young African players that is and was not the case very often. On the other hand, FIFA decided to remove the official license of football agents in 2015. After that decision every human who was old enough was able to register him- or herself as an agent. The conclusion of this part of the article can be that the rhetoric where the biggest international football organization deals with does not really connect with the needs of young African players.

What about the others?

At the moment, the African Football organization (CAF) was founded in 1957, FIFA already existed for several decades. Besides that, only four African football associations (Egypt, Sudan, South Africa and Ethiopia) were recognized by the FIFA at that moment. In other words, the historical role of the African football organizations within the discussion was very small, and they still have to deal with that division of roles.

Now comes the question whether the young African footballers should search for support within the NGO-world or the political organizations. About the role of political organizations we cannot say very much. Of course, we do not know where they are talking about behind doors, but officially spoken only the EU started a tiny research on this topic in 2011. The result of that research was that there is a need for more attention on the African migrant problem. The EU only used football migrants as an example.
At the same time, NGO’s, especially in the West-African part of the continent, try to get more attention for this topic, and bring out official statements about unequal relations between young footballers and their agents or coaches. Also their focus is not really on this topic, because they put the football migration in the broader debate on migration. Maybe, because football migration of young African not that big of a problem? Conclusions cannot be made, because nobody really wants to run the football business when it comes to the young Africans.

As a conclusion of this article, we need to agree with Kate Manzo who is stating that: ‘Not much ever changes in international development, and that football is no more than a magnet with which to draw young people deeper into the operational orbit of NGOs and their donors.’ In other words, there is definitely an organization (FIFA) who runs the football business, but doesn’t really want to. All the other international and political organizations do not have the guts to really agitate against FIFA’s position or do not want to start their own policy of changes.

Written by: Castor Van Dillen
This small biography, written by a well-known Dutch sports-writer Michel van Egmond, is about the life story of Christian Gyan. Gyan was a professional football player and is a cult hero for the supporters of Feyenoord. He worked for a few years in the harbor of Rotterdam, but cannot work anymore due to a brain disease. It describes very well what can happen to a young African football player during his journey on the European (professional) football fields.

Gyan and Patrick Allotey, another Ghanian football player who came to Feyenoord at the same time, signed their first contract for Feyenoord on 21 October 1995. This was just a few months before the Dutch football federation in collaboration with the professional football clubs decided that non-EU professional footballers always needed to earn one and a half times as much as the football players from the EU. Due to this first contract, and because of a lack of help Gyan did get a lot of financial problems and Allotey went back totally broken to Ghana after his contract was finished.

Van Egmond describes the situation wherein these two young African footballers came at the moment they were travelling to Europe in getting their dreams come true pretty well in this quote: ‘From all the African immigrants the footballers usually belong to the category with whom the chance of success is bigger than the chance to fail, if it only were because of the fact that they do not needed to paddle to the European coast in a self-made boat, but just were flown in business class, with lightning speed and safely to a country where a lot of money was waiting for them.’ Some did get a lot more luck than others. back in the days, came to London at a young age in the money-factory of Chelsea. He already was a multi-millionaire as a teenager. Only for Gyan and Allotey their history was different.

Simultaneously, Rodger Linse, a former football agent of Christian Gyan, is talking about a youth friend and fellow footballer of Gyan, Wisdom Eli Bor, and his struggle for recognition in the book: ‘Starting from that moment he became a successful person through the eyes of some other people in the African society, and they also expected that he was going to help them.’ So, not only their European life circumstances and possibilities do give these young African football players a huge amount of pressure. Their origin does even more, because their family, friends and former neighbors equate a trip to Europe with success and wealth.
Lastly, what this book explains to us is that Gyan, despite his miserable financial situation, still remains positive and believes in a good future with the help of the Christian God. Gyan gives approval to Van Egmond for this book with the following words: 'God bless you, Mr. Micheal.' In other words, for some of the young African football players belief in the good of humankind is important in their choice to seize their chance on the European football fields. After all, the conclusion of this book seems to be that there is a lot of ambiguity of the situation where a lot of young African (professional) footballers live in Europe. In the meantime, a huge group of people wants to help them. From football agents, managers, supporters and big employers, everyone wants to contribute, but there is a lack of organization and coordination.

Title: King; de vele wederopstandingen van Chris Gyan
Author: Michel van Egmond
ISBN: 9789048840649
Reviewed by: Castor van Dillen
George Weah, born in Monrovia, Liberia on the 1st October 1966 is one of the most well-known African players to play in Europe. Seen here playing for AC Milan, he became the only African player to win the World Footballer of the Year in the 1995/96 season. He also had spells at Paris St Germain, Monaco, Chelsea and Manchester City. He became synonymous with the new breed of centre forward that emerged in the early 1990s who combined deadly finishing with pace, strength and skill. This is epitomised by the wonder goal he scored against Verona for AC Milan.

What makes Weah’s case so fascinating in reference to the themes of this issue (African footballers in Europe) is that after his illustrious footballing career, he turned to politics in his native Liberia and began to use his influence to attempt to make a difference. He recently became elected President of Liberia as of January 2018 through the country’s first complete democratic process in over two decades due to civil war and political strife that has been rampant. It is this conjuncture between footballing migrant and Presidential candidate which has attracted academic attention as well as our own here at Football Scholar. It demonstrates how football, and in particular Weah, provides a backdrop for investigation into understanding the nuances of Liberia’s case.

Gary Armstrong, questioned the role of Football as a method of intervention in the Liberian Civil War, citing “The snapshot analysis as to what football – and indeed sport – might or can do in zones of conflict can be seductive but also delusional”. The zero-sum, win at all costs attitude fostered amongst communitarian football clubs, alongside heightened club loyalties in Liberian football can inadvertently contribute to sharpening divisions in civil conflicts where pro government forces, rebel groups or ethnic conflicting boundaries are already significantly ambiguous.

The 2005 Liberian presidential election has attracted a range of interest due to its backdrop of civil conflict. The two candidates were Weah and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and it ended in the latter’s victory and Africa’s first female President. Ibrahim Seaga focused on George Weah’s media portrayal in the 2005 Liberian presidential election, and how his grassroots popularity could not provide an antidote for his lack of political qualifications. Here we see the limitations faced by someone of George’s stature and the drawbacks of myth-making of African footballers in their native countries. Harris and Lewis analysed the character of the Liberia elections and how the polls were similar or dissimilar to other African democratic processes.

They concluded that ‘The elections display many characteristics of other African polls including weak institutions, patronage, ethno-regionalism, violence and the de-legitimisation of results, although the Liberian case shows that, as elsewhere in Africa, the exact mixture of these and yet more idiosyncratic factors influences the results and the quality of the ensuing democracy.’

Now elected President and advocating a battle against corruption and illiteracy whilst voluntarily halving his Presidential salary. It will be of keen interest to Africanist scholars to see what changes Weah can bring and how his journey will inspire his fellow countrymen.

To reach the heights that he has done provides an excellent example of a ‘dream’ and not a nightmare. In political circles, his background has worked against him.
Hester den Boer is known as freelance research journalist and photographer. Starting from 2013, she is part of the research journalist platform Investico. During her study, she specialized herself into the study of Russian language and culture, and she did her Masters’ in Holocaust- and Genocide-studies at the University of Amsterdam. She did the research which is relevant for the theme of this magazine in 2014. The purpose of her research was to get know more about the trafficking of young African football players. For her research, she went to Cameroon and Ghana, and she had a lot of contact with Jean-Claude Mbovoumin, who rebelled against the way the world was dealing with the trafficking in young African football players. In this interview, she talks, a few years after her research, about her experiences, and about the reasons behind the fact that there exists a lack of knowledge on this topic. Hester den Boer does not call herself an expert in the broad field, but can definitely be called an expert within the Dutch journalistic world on the topic of this interview.

The first question which I asked was based on the fact that she did this research onto trafficking in young African footballers from a journalistic viewpoint which was not so much done before. So, I wondered how long the research took, why she started to research this topic on that specific moment, and, finally, which areas she did research in. On that last part of the question she could show and talk about a lot of possible areas for research and improvement. In the interview, she talked about her fellow journalists from Norway, Denmark and Great-Britain who also started to research in the year 2014. According to her, there were not any specific reason for the fact that she started the research in 2014, but what she saw is that after she finished her research the world of journalists did finally awoke onto this topic. The real reason that she came to this topic was, that the first purpose of the research was to get more insight in the financial flows of the football world. She found out that there was a lack of control and rules in the football world. Besides that, she experienced that the football world is very closed, or in her words, in a Dutch saying: ‘Niemand wil de vuile was buiten hangen’. That is why she did not finished this research, and only did some ‘small’ research on this part of the football world.

Besides the readings of the available academic related books, she tried to come in contact with football organizations like, the KNVB (Dutch Football Association), Fifpro (International labour union for professional footballers), the professional teams, and many other (international) football relatives. She found out that almost nobody wanted to talk. Only Maarten Fontein, then the director of ADO Den Haag, slightly showed interest, but Den Boer’s research was also a bit ‘outside his league’ if we believe Den Boer. Finally, Den Boer’s conclusion was that only way to get to know more about the trafficking in young African footballers is to go back to the source. She did so and went to Ghana and Cameroon. Through couch surfing, with the use of the search term ‘football’, of all places, she did get some contacts in those countries.
What she saw there was the importance of the football academies. The young players were brain-washed with dreams of a professional career in Europe, white coaches and agents were very present and that there was almost no control on these football academies. The purpose for Den Boer was to know more about the ‘middle men’ within this part of the world of football. It was tough to get a real insight, because as she said: 'The people who wanted to talk are also the people who are eager for a talk, and I do not think that this insight gives the best overview.'

Another important question to think about, is the question: ‘Who makes the rules in the (football) world?’ In the interview Den Boer on the one side pointed out that mostly ‘white Europeans’ control the football world, but that on the other side the ‘middle men’ often have a more regional background, and make use of social relations which came forward during the colonial times. So, the problems are broader than just ‘North-South’-differences in relationships. Besides that, she states that the professional football do have a lot of social responsibility regarding her field of research. When a club does not bring a footballer to Europe, or does not give accompaniment to a player who comes to Europe, the chance of success is low. What is also important is that, the accompaniment does not stops after the footballer is successfully or unsuccessfully tested. According to Den Boer, the pressure on the players is too high: 'Getting the pressure away from the footballer is exactly something clubs, agents, but als the international football organizations should do.'

Taking all this together, one of the conclusions regarding this research is that, despite all her finished research in a huge amount of areas, it is almost impossible to get a real insight. The most important result of the research is, that you, finally, can find some Dutch research about the topic. According to her, you cannot say that her research was groundbreaking, but she gave away a huge amount of possibilities for further research, and journalistic attention. Unfortunately, for her, for me, and for the rest of the world this gaining of attention not really worked out, and attention for the trafficking in young African footballers is still very low. Not surprisingly, her final statement was: ‘Where are the ‘politics’ within this problem?’ Luckily, there do exist some pioneers in the journalistic world. Hester den Boer is one of them.
This biography, which was written by a well-known Dutch sport-writer Michel van Egmond, is about the Dutch football agent Rob Jansen. Deal, symbolizes the explosion of the world of football in the 1980s and 1990s. Besides that, this book gives a good insight in the role a football agent needs to have in his relationship with the club, international community and organizations, and the most important of all, according to Jansen, is the relationship with the football player itself.

In this book Van Egmond travels around whole Europe with Jansen to experience Jansen’s ‘imperium’ of mostly Dutch football players he represents in the capacity of football agent. What becomes clear is that even he is not always transparent to his surroundings. But the difference between him and a lot of other football agents is that you get the feeling in this book that he wants the best for the football players. Jansen describes his own field as; ‘a jungle, with a matching predator mentality. Everyone tries to survive on the cost of someone else.’ At the same time Jansen agrees with Van Egmond when he states: ‘His branch does not have a very clean image.’

Unfortunately, the biographer and the protagonist do not dig deeper into that illegal part of the branch. Probably, due to the fact that Van Egmond was more focused on the individual, and because Jansen does not want to have anything to do with illegality. Besides that small touch on the illegality and the lack of rules in the world of football agent, they outside Europe. talk with each other about the football world outside Europe. Again these talks do not go that much into detail, but what you can deduct is a bit of a orientalist viewpoint on the rest of the football world. When Van Egmond asks Jansen what he thinks about his payments in countries in Russia or the Middle East, he says the following: ‘Swallow a bit and let it be. … Of course! What would you do? Going to a Arabic law court? Good luck!’ In other words, it seems to be that there does not exist an equal relationship between the European world of football and the football world outside Europe.

Taking all this together, the final conclusion of the book sounds a bit pessimistic and shows that a lot needs to be improved in the world of football, or in Jansen’s words; ‘even at the moment where the biggest criminal arrives at a football club, when he gives this club the new ‘Messi’, the football agent will be welcomed as a real King.’

It seems to be that the lack of intentions from the football world is exactly the problem which needs to faced, and quick too.

Title: Deal; met Rob Jansen achter de schermen van het topvoetbal
Author: Michel van Egmond
ISBN: 9789048842377
Reviewed by: Castor van Dillen
We address some statements that arose during our research

‘Politicians should be more active regarding the topic of this issue’

*Jake:* Currently there seems to be growing focus on immigration in political circles and yet there is little discussion about specific types of migration. I feel as if politicians find the rhetoric of this issue more beneficial than solving it. Where football labour from Africa is concerned, there is not enough discussion about the nuance involved in the African footballer’s journey. Therefore, I feel it begins with the footballing world, who need to raise awareness of this issue amongst politicians as actual policy change is difficult.

*Castor:* Definitely, but not all kinds of political levels. I think changes in this world should start bottom-up. Small political decisions do easier change the structure of a human life than huge law-making or aggressive judging.

‘Football symbolizes the current global structure’

*Jake:* I feel football is definitely a microcosm of the unevenness and inequality present in the global capitalist system. This is no more evident than where accessibility is concerned. Hopeful African footballers must possess the correct documents to gain direct access to these opportunities in Europe. The types of obstacles put in place make the necessity for circumvention greater and increase the risks of exploitation for Africans. This is the case for all types of migration, not only football. The role of organisations such as FIFA demonstrate how corporations are also able to circumvent state sovereignty, no more so than in Africa where states are considerably weaker.

*Castor:* Actually, it does. And when you want to change this global structure it is important that the current idea of power relations changes. That change need to start bottom-up, and it is a very all process.

‘How do you think African teams will fare at this year’s World Cup in Russia?’

*Jake:* Having the majority of their players born outside of its borders, Morocco offers an interesting perspective in light of the themes of this issue. Whilst Senegal has been given what they may see as a favourable draw, especially considering the season Sadio Mane had with Liverpool. I think Nigeria will go furthest, they have a good young side and they also look the part, bringing African style to the tournament with their strip!

*Castor:* Based on World Cup history I would say that it will still take a long time before an African nation will win the Cup. However, you never know, it is football. Some teams and some players are successful, most of them not.
EDITORS’ REFLECTIONS

This issue has attempted to create an overview of African Footballers in Europe. By doing this, we have seen the influence of football across the African continent. Also how the legacy of colonialism is still prevalent as it is found in both neo-colonial and neo-liberal forms. They exist within the processes involved in football influence the game on a major scale, in particular in bringing young aspiring African footballers to Europe. This, I feel, is exacerbated by the fact the game has become increasingly more global and the profit margins have grown as a result.

When you place this larger overview alongside individual cases such as Chris Gyan and George Weah, we can see that in fact migration from Africa to Europe is impacted by a range of different push and pull factors that enmesh these aspiring young footballers amongst processes which offer both reward and risk. The rewards are clear, however I feel as if the risks receive less attention. As the game has become global and borderless, the opportunities for circumvention have only grown.

Agents, middle men and football clubs themselves serve to benefit greatly from the selling of false dreams to these young footballers. What only emphasizes this point is that often these are young boys in their early teens that can end up abandoned on the streets of Paris by their so called agents.

More has to be done to curb the role of these agents and middle men. Whilst the opening of academies in Africa eases this, it does not suffice or address the lack of infrastructure and bureaucracy in place on the continent which allows for such circumventing that places these young Africans at risk. All the while, FIFA, CONCAF and European clubs continued to benefit from the abilities of those African footballers that make it and a blind eye is turned toward those who are left abandoned so far from home. We must therefore make a clear distinction between football migrants and football traffickers. Overall, there are too many avenues for exploitation due to the lack of authority present in the football industry and this is sadly the case in Africa than anywhere else. The discrepancy between Europe and Africa in terms of standards of living and economic prosperity has become expressed through the tribulations of these aspiring footballers and more must be done.

Written by: Jake White

The World never changes

Within this magazine an analysis of the world of football has been done. An analysis which was based on the question to what extent the trafficking and migration of young African footballers can be seen as a more or less neocolonial discourse. What I have experienced during this research is that it is hard to speak of a neocolonial discourse in a direct sense. Of course the rich (Western)-European clubs, often owned by rich non-Europeans by the way, bobo’s and control the international football organizations, but it are the ‘middle men’, as journalist Hester den Boer called them, who get in contact with young African footballers. Those dreaming young men are often not Western Europeans, but first or second generation migrants from the all-over the African continent. With the getting of regulation on these middle men you will probably find the solution. In other words, our world never changes, even not within this situation. There are center, semi-center, and outside actors regarding the migration of young African footballers. That is not that different as how it was back in colonial times, or in the rest of world history.

Door: Castor van Dillen
Bibliography & Further Reading

What do the Academics Say?


From Monrovia and Back


Interview with Hester Den Boer


Who Runs Football?


