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ESSAYS

**“Angola Is Not Just about Oil, War and Poverty”:
Reflections on Angolan Soccer, Nationalism
and the Run to the 2006 World Cup Finals**

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Abstract

Prior to Angola's initial qualification for the 2006 World Cup Finals, internationally the country was largely known only for its prodigious oil reserves, protracted civil war (1975-2002), copious landmines, pervasive corruption, and rampant poverty amidst mind-boggling wealth. Following its qualifying victory over Rwanda, though, soccer, for the first time, placed Angola squarely on the world stage and helped to foster a sense of national pride domestically, uniting the deeply divided country around its new soccer heroes. This reflection examines the period leading up to the momentous victory versus Rwanda and the aftermath as Angola and its former colonial master, Portugal, faced each other in the first round of the Finals. As an avid soccer fan, the reflection is based upon discussions and general observations made while I was living and conducting research in Angola and Portugal continuously from 2004 through 2006.

As I lay in bed on the night of October 8, 2005 in my sweltering apartment in Luanda, the Angolan capital, the early morning hours were punctuated with sporadic gunfire. Rather than being alarmed, though, I smiled, knowing that these were shots of exaltation, fired in celebration of Angola's first-ever qualification for the World Cup Finals. Earlier that day a 79th minute goal by Angola's captain, Fabrice Maieco, better known as "Akwa," had sealed a 1-0 win over Rwanda in Kigali and ensured Angola's team, the *Palancas Negras*, a place in the upcoming 2006 World Cup Finals in Germany. And, although Akwa's header had reached the back of the net many hours earlier, Angolans were in no mood to cease rejoicing the country's improbable run to the Cup. Yet, even after the initial celebrations abated and the last reveler retired for the night, Akwa's goal had a residual effect that helped to unite this deeply divided country around its new soccer heroes. Following the victory in Rwanda, soccer, for the first time, had placed Angola squarely on the world stage and was helping to foster a sense of national pride domestically. Heretofore, Angola was a country that was largely known for its prodigious oil reserves, protracted civil war (1975-2002), copious landmines, pervasive corruption, and rampant poverty amidst mind-boggling wealth. However, capturing the new nationalist sentiment inspired by the *Palancas Negras'* miraculous run, Akwa declared, "We have proven that Angola is not just about oil, war and poverty"; Angolans everywhere hope that the captain's proclamation continues to hold going forward.

The heady run to the 2006 World Cup Finals had, in fact, started inauspiciously and with little fanfare some years earlier. This is hardly surprising considering that Angola only began endeavoring to qualify for the World

Cup in 1984, in that case for the 1986 Cup in Mexico, and had never managed to reach the Finals in any of its prior attempts. In fact, a 3-1 defeat at the hands of continental lightweight Chad in October of 2003 in a preliminary qualifying round threatened to keep the *Palancas Negra* from the group stage and saw their Brazilian coach, Ismael Kurtz, relieved of his duties. A win at home in the return leg was now imperative and new coach Luís Oliveira Gonçalves, who had enjoyed success with Angola's under-20 team and was popularly known as the "Professor," was anointed to orchestrate this do-or-die task. Thankfully for the Angolan squad, a 2-0 home victory in November 2003 at the imposing *Cidadela* stadium in Luanda was sufficient to advance the team to the group stage, from which one squad from each of five groups (each comprised of six teams) would emerge to claim one of the continent's spots for Germany.

Although Gonçalves had worked his magic against lowly Chad, Angola's group stage opponents promised to be much more challenging. Indeed, the inclusion of continental juggernaut Nigeria in the group immediately relegated Angola and the group's other squads – Gabon, Algeria, Zimbabwe and Rwanda – to putative also-rans. Nigeria's Super Eagles had qualified for the previous three World Cup Finals and looked to be assured of another spot this time around. In fact, after learning of the group's constituents, the Angolan Football Federation's Secretary General, Delcio Costa, indicated that Angola's ambition was simply to finish in the top three, as this would assure the *Palancas Negras* a spot in the African Nations Cup Finals in Egypt in early 2006. It appears, however, as though Gonçalves and the squad had loftier goals.

Angola opened the group stage in June 2004 with an uninspiring 0-0 draw in Algeria, perhaps guilty of

looking ahead to a looming meeting in Luanda against Nigeria just over two weeks away. Fortunately for Angola, Nigeria would arrive in Luanda for the June match without superstars Jay-Jay Okocha and Obafemi Martins, both fixtures in Europe's top leagues. Whether due to their absence or more of the Professor's magic, the *Palancas Negras* dominated the visitors, though they had to settle for only a 1-0 victory courtesy of Akwa's 84th minute goal. Having arrived in Angola for an extended research project just after this unlikely win, I enjoyed the conversations I had concerning the team and this inspiring victory with a multitude of Angolans, most of whom were generally very realistic in their assessments, with virtually everyone still resigned to the fact that the Super Eagles would ultimately prevail. After all, the qualifying season was almost a year-and-a-half long and the *Palancas Negras* would still have to travel to Nigeria, while also contending with the other teams in the group. As if on cue, two weeks later Angola needed a late goal to secure a tie with Gabon while Nigeria surged to the top of the group table with a 1-0 victory over Algeria. Over the course of the year, the Super Eagles and *Palancas Negras* both played well, though a March 2005 defeat to Zimbabwe appeared to be the death knell for the Angolans. Nigeria had failed to drop a game since its debacle in Luanda and would still have the opportunity to host their closest competitors before the tournament ended.

The June 2005 rematch with the Super Eagles in Kano, Nigeria took place almost exactly a year to the day of the *Palancas Negras*' victory in Luanda. After Angola fell behind in the 5th minute on a goal by a healthy Okocha, it appeared as though Nigeria would send upstart Angola back to Luanda contemplating only what might have been. Yet again, however, the Professor's squad had other

ambitions, and a 60th minute goal by Figueiredo secured a draw for the *Palancas Negras* and the much needed point and, in fact, was ultimately the only match that Nigeria failed to win at home.

Unlike following the earlier win in Luanda, the atmosphere in Angola was now truly charged. Everywhere I went in the country Angolans were talking optimistically about the squad's chances and were now intimately familiar with the schedules of both the Super Eagles and *Palancas Negras*. Tied at the top of the group table with 15 points each, Nigeria had remaining matches with Algeria and Zimbabwe while Angola still had to contend with Gabon and Rwanda. For Nigeria, the situation was suddenly gravely serious and drastic measures had to be taken, especially as they no longer controlled their own fate: owing to the Angolans' advantage in head-to-head play, if Angola were to win its remaining two games the *Palanca Negras* would advance to the World Cup Finals regardless of the Super Eagles' outcomes. Subsequently, credible accusations were leveled at Nigeria that it had both bankrolled the Gabonese team's trip to Luanda and promised significant rewards if Gabon could trip up the *Palancas Negras* in their September match in Luanda. Financial incentives notwithstanding, Gonçalves' squad coolly disposed of Gabon 3-0, while Nigeria cruised to a 5-2 victory over Algeria, setting the stage for the final round of matches on October 8th.

The build-up to this critical Sunday in October in Angola was electrifying. Whether in the capital or in the country's interior, Angolans were eagerly and actively discussing the country's chances while sales of *Palancas Negras* jerseys and other paraphernalia burgeoned. This soccer-inspired fever was unprecedented in a country that typically embraced and derived great pride primarily

from the nation's dominant basketball team, which had, in fact, just won the African Championship in August – the eighth time in the last nine competitions, and fourth in a row. Although Angola is a largely impoverished country, basketball is widely played and I can attest personally to the high level of play even in informal pick-up games. Yet, it was soccer that was now capturing the nation's attention. Even the central government responded, offering a partially-subsidized package that included a chartered flight, accommodations and a ticket to the Rwanda match in Kigali, which it regularly advertised in the nation's only daily newspaper, the state-owned *Jornal de Angola*.

As October 8th approached, those who had forsaken the charter offer to Kigali planned their days around the game, gathering with friends to listen to or watch the match and amassing cases of the local beer, *Cuca*, hoping that an extended post-match celebration would be in order. The mood in the capital was optimistic, yet subdued, as Angola had earlier managed only a 1-0 win at home versus Rwanda, while now the pressure was intense, and for the *Palancas Negras*, unprecedented, as well. To exacerbate an already intensely tense situation, while the Angolans were struggling to find the back of the net in Kigali, the Super Eagles were simultaneously busy annihilating Zimbabwe 5-1 in Abuja. However, Akwa's header roughly ten minutes from time sent shock waves across the continent, deflating fans in Nigeria and even helping to empty its national stadium, while fomenting hysteria in Angola's usually chaotic, but now pensive, capital. Some nervous minutes later, and the *Palancas Negras* had completed their transformation from pushovers to giant-killers.

To be in Angola, even as an expatriate, over the coming weeks was an exhilarating experience as *Palanca*

Negra jerseys proliferated, increasingly donned by Angolans from all but the most elite circles. Moreover, the central government publicly rewarded the players with money, cars and houses, with Akwa receiving an additional bonus for his “golden goal” in Kigali. In a country in which the government’s mismanagement of billions of petro-dollars is a consistent source of popular disapproval, the distribution of these rewards – rumored to be in the tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars – transpired with little public criticism. For now, at least, the collective euphoria appeared to have muffled even the government’s fiercest critics, in great part because to appear unsupportive of the *Palancas Negras* in any way at this point would have seemed, well, simply unpatriotic.

The fact that success on the soccer pitch was contributing to Angolans’ sense of nationalism and mending social divisions is remarkable considering that the nation was still reeling after the conclusion of a 27-year civil war in 2002. The war had pitted the ruling MPLA against UNITA rebels and even though the fighting had stopped, UNITA had successfully transformed itself from a failed guerrilla group into a viable political party and thus deep social divisions remained, roughly along the lines of the earlier conflict. Moreover, all but the staunchest MPLA supporters are critical of the corruption benefiting those at the highest levels of government, who are currently enjoying the “peace dividends,” that they believe encourages the ubiquitous *gasosa*, or petty bribe, with which Angolans of all income levels have to contend on a daily basis. Recently, all of these grievances and allegiances have been in the forefront of Angolans’ minds as the country prepares for democratic elections, while the first signs of election-related violence had begun to materialize. And, in addition to the existing

myriad issues engendering popular discontent, the elections themselves are also rankling many Angolans, as promised dates and deadlines have either passed and/or been repeatedly amended by the ruling MPLA, thereby extending President Dos Santos' already lengthy 28 years in office. In fact, only the *Palancas Negras*' momentous World Cup run appeared capable of diffusing the tension that was threatening to affect further violence, especially in Angola's central highlands where party allegiances are more diverse and the environment more contentious.

In December 2005, the Angolans discovered that they would be matched in Group D with Mexico, Iran and, provocatively, Portugal, the former colonial power who had left Angola only after a bitter war for independence concluded in 1975.

No team that Angola could have drawn in its group – not even the mighty Brazilians – could have generated as much interest and excitement, especially after learning that, in fact, its very first World Cup Finals match would be against its former colonial overlords. Every Angolan has a strong opinion of the Portuguese, generally ranging from disdain to ambivalence, so this match was to represent much more than just a simple game; this contest would be about national pride and respect. Moreover, rather than a distant memory of former interlopers now long since gone, the Portuguese have been increasingly returning to Angola, mainly as businessmen taking advantage of the opportunities in Angola that access to capital and a shared language offer. Thus, the Portuguese presence in Angola, while no longer “colonial” in nature, is often characterized hostilely by those Angolans for whom historical injustices shape current impressions. In fact, the last time the two teams squared off, in 2001 in Lisbon, animosity overwhelmed the outgunned *Palancas Negras*.

In this inappropriately named “friendly” match, Portugal defeated Angola 5-1, while the match was abandoned 20 minutes before the end after Angola had four players dismissed for bad tackles and dissent. Yet, while the upcoming World Cup match was certainly expected to be heated, and Portugal would again be the clear favorite once the teams took the field, the Angolans vowed to remain composed and deliver a better result.

In Angola, in the aftermath of the World Cup draw, the Portugal match began to overshadow the broader prospects for the *Palancas Negras*, and even the tournament itself. Could Angolan beat Iran? Play with Mexico? These questions went unanswered, and virtually unasked, as the nationalist drum beat ever louder, drowning out everything but discussion of the opening game with Portugal. As I left Angola in the early part of 2006, my research completed, the flame that had been ignited almost two years earlier by the then unassuming *Palancas Negras* was burning as strongly as ever. In fact, I spent the next six months in Portugal and can also confirm that the sizeable Angolan diaspora in that country displayed every bit as much enthusiasm for their team – and perhaps even more – than their compatriots to the south.

Although Angola failed to advance past the initial group stage in Germany, they did manage a 3rd-place finish in their group, tying a strong Mexico team and only losing to Portugal by a 1-0 tally, evidence that the Professor had once again performed a magical act of sorts while the team garnered considerable international respect. Whether continued success at the highest levels of international soccer will continue to foster national pride and unity in a country that has significant, copious challenges to address are unknown. But for one magical two-year period the country’s issues were largely cast to the side while the

population lauded their beloved *Palancas Negras*, firing shots of joy rapturously into the Angolan night to mark their arrival on the world stage.