

Review of Paul Darby's *Africa, Football, and FIFA: Politics, Colonialism, and Resistance*

Emad Mirmotahari

When reading Paul Darby's *Africa, Football, and FIFA: Politics, Colonialism, and Resistance*, I could not help reminiscing about a central problematic in historical scholarship that I encountered in my early studies. I took a seminar entitled 'Historiography and Revolutionary France', in which we examined different theoretical approaches to 1789 and its impact on subsequent revolutions. The point of the course was to acquaint students with the scholarly shift from History to *histories*. We first read R.R. Palmer's *Twelve Who Ruled*—a work of History, which profiles all of the key revolutionaries from Marat to Robespierre. The details of the revolution, its principles, its causes, and its trajectory were ultimately to be gleaned from these individuals' ideas and actions. Later on we read *histories*, works like Roger Chariter's *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* and Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre*, works that disperse 1789 throughout a complex web of social, cultural, and ideological transformations in France and Europe.

Paul Darby's book, while well researched, meticulous, and lucidly written, represents the first inclination in scholarship, the classic History, which favours 'events', the official, the top-down, and the institutional at the expense of *histories*, which privilege 'processes', the popular, the cultural, and the holistic. Though Darby acknowledges that any discussion about the development of African football depends on its rigorous contextualisation, the 'people' in FIFA around whom much of the book is written, claim the bulk of the narrative.

“The empirical evidence and narratives in this book which chart and describe the development of African football in the international arena are underpinned by a theoretical framework of global political, economic and cultural processes.”¹ But the problem is that the book is neither consistently theorised nor does it sufficiently engage the ‘global political, economic, and cultural processes’. The majority of the book yields to the leadership and political platforms of the ‘four who ruled’, if you will.

Four key luminaries in the world game, Sir Stanley Rous, João Havelange, Lennart Johansson, and Sepp Blatter, have had a huge influence on Africa’s place in FIFA and football’s international hierarchy. Their respective careers clearly warrant the specific investigation which they receive in this book.²

The exhaustive and exhausting exposition of these four individuals not only makes poor reading, but also it almost seem to imply that FIFA generates, rather than inherits and reflects, broader processes that affect football. One can read a considerable number of pages in the central parts of the book and walk away with the distinct impression that the book has little to do with Africa, but is a cataloguing of FIFA politics and policies and, to a lesser extent, CAF [Confederation Africain de Football]. Had the book been renamed *FIFA and World Football*, little to no changes would have to be made to the organisation and emphases of the book.

It would, nonetheless, be hazardous to ignore these individuals’ power, policies, and attitudes toward football especially where Africa is concerned.³ But

similar conclusions can be drawn about FIFA's power, Eurocentricity, and historic racism without belabouring the individual profiles and actions of ranking officials. Darby could have used these individuals' policies as a launch pad into exploring the broader political climate and historical realities that permeate the sport.

What happens as a result of Darby's approach is that topics that require the critical attention they deserve seldom receive it. Darby neglects two key issues that speak to profound theoretical debates and contemporary trends in the game. The first is African player migration to Europe, which gained its seemingly irreversible inertia in the early 1990s. This merits at least a chapter given that club football, a mere spectre in Darby's book, is far more frequent and vital to player cultivation than national team competition. Moreover, nowhere is the impact of globalisation on football more profoundly visible than at the club level. Darby gives this topic a perfunctory three pages of discussion. Second, Darby flirts with unpacking the very designation 'African' football, one that is undermined by fissures within and between nations, regions, and spheres – internal 'national' ones, between the 'Arab north' and the sub-Sahara, Lusophony, Francophony, and Anglophony, etc. Darby postpones and largely neglects dealing with the ironies and tensions in his own observations about Algeria being the most salient example of African national mobilisation via football and the fact of the Egyptian Abdelaziz Abdallah Salem's assumption of the first presidency of CAF.

But Darby's work does at times achieve balance between his profiles of the 'four' and the larger contexts that he invokes. His discussion of Stanley Rous successfully integrates the latter's ambiguous positions toward South Africa (and therefore Apartheid) and how this aided

João Havelange's momentous bid for FIFA presidency. Moreover, Darby incisively positions African football amidst the power struggle between Europe and South America over FIFA preeminence. He does not shy away from asserting that despite Havelange's promises of Third World unity, this alliance was ephemeral and advantageous only to the South American bloc, which used Africa and CAF as pawns to subvert European supremacy.

The book's real strengths and impetus reside in the first eighty or so pages, mostly in chapter one, 'Football Diffusion and Colonial Doctrine in Africa', and chapter 2 'Football, Indigenous Resistance and African Independence.' Darby persuasively merges football, urbanisation, and colonial strategies, and maps the differing approaches to football of Europe's main colonial powers and its impact on the discrepant evolution of African football. The chapter closes with an examination of the appropriation and redeployment of football, once a 'civilising' tool, as a rallying point for agitation and the nascent national consciousness then spreading across Africa. Darby makes these points even more vivid by using telling anecdotes, like the fact that the first organisation that many new African nations petitioned to join, often before other important strategic and economic ones, was CAF.

Recent developments warrant even more scholarship about the role of Africa in world football. With Senegal's opening victory over France and its progression to the quarter finals of Japan/Korea FIFA World Cup 2002, Africa's five representatives to Germany 2006, South Africa's successful bid to host the 2010 FIFA World Cup, and the irrefutable stature of European-based African players like Mahamadou Diarra (Real Madrid), Michael Essien (Chelsea), Didier Drogba (Chelsea), Benny

McCarthy (Blackburn), and Samuel Eto'o (Barcelona), FIFA executive organs and politicians will likely have less and less sway over the perception and treatment of African football and footballers. More ideally, these bodies will be peopled by African delegates more fairly, more evenly, and more often.

Endnotes

- ¹ Darby, Paul. *Africa, Football, and FIFA: Politics, Colonialism, and Resistance*. London: Frank Cass, 2002. 183.
- ² *Ibid.*, 180.
- ³ Sir Stanley Rous was English, João Havelange is Brazilian, Lennart Johansson is Swedish, and Sepp Blatter is Swiss.