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## Football in DR Congo: A Critical Account of “Congolese Football”

*Tamba Nlandu*

Among the giants of African football, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has had, since its first participation in continental and world competitions, its moments of glory and demise. The paradox of Congolese football is epitomized by its success during times of political dictatorship, winning two African Cup of Nations (1968 and 1974) under the Mobutu regime, and its decline during times of democratic trials, failing to either qualify for or advance beyond the group stage of Confederation of African Football (CAF) and FIFA competitions. Without any doubt, the DRC has always been blessed with both human and natural resources. However, in football, like many other spheres of Congolese life, these resources have tended to be mismanaged or simply squandered. As a result, fame without fortune appears to be the norm for Congolese football players loyal to their homeland. While football has tended to serve as the “opium of the people,” the players have often been left to fend for themselves leading most of them to immigrate to countries with greener football pastures.

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Perhaps the resurgence of the dominance of the Congolese big clubs (especially, Tout Puissant [TP] Mazembe and Association Sportive [AS] Vita Club) in continental competitions coupled with the success of the local-based national team players who have won two of the African Nations Championship titles (2009 and 2016) might be signaling a new era in Congolese football. However, the premature eliminations of TP Mazembe, Maniema Union, and AS Vita Club from the 2021–2022 editions of the CAF Champions League and Confederation Cup coupled with the Leopards' poor performances in their 2019 Cup of Nations, 2020 CHAN, and 2022 World Cup qualifying matches could instead signal the persistence of all the chronic systemic issues inherent in Congolese football.

## INTRODUCTION

In December 2016 and January 2017, respectively, two events that could be regarded as symptomatic of the contradictions of Congolese football, at the national level, brought to light the immense challenges faced by those who remain optimistic about the future of the sport in DRC. First, on December 14, 2016, Denis Kambayi, the Minister of Sports at that time, unilaterally suspended the 2016–2017 national Super League competition. Among other reasons for his untimely decision, the Minister cited excessive violence in stadiums, lack of sporting civism and adequate fan management, and non-adherence by teams to the league's revenue-sharing policies.<sup>1</sup> One wonders, however, why such a decision had to be taken two days before two of the most anticipated matches of the season: AS Vita Club *versus* Daring Club Motema Pembe in Kinshasa and TP Mazembe *versus* St. Eloi Lupopo in Lubumbashi. Those skeptical of the Minister's decision expressed their suspicion about the fact that that decision had been taken on the eve of the end of what was supposed to be President Joseph Kabila's second and final term. Was this decision motivated by a justified fear of the imminent revolt against President Kabila's refusal to step down on December 19, 2016, as stipulated by the country's constitution? Was it an attempt at avoiding a repeat of the 1959 uprising against the colonial administration, revolt which started after a match played at *Stade Tata Raphael*, in Matonge, Kinshasa, in December 1959,

<sup>1</sup>For more concerning this decision, see <http://www.radiookapi.net/2017/01/03/actualite/sport/reprise-de-la-division-i-la-linafoot-attend-encore-linstruction-de-la#sthash.apRcJU8z.dpuf>, accessed in January 2017.

and culminated in the country gaining its political independence on June 30, 1960? Whatever the motive behind the Minister’s untimely decision was, the suspension of the national league competition through a unilateral decision points to the issue of perpetual political interference in Congolese football.

Second, in January of 2017, Florent Ibenge, the coach of the national team, published the list of 24 players selected by his coaching staff for the 2017 African Cup of Nations to be held in Gabon. Striking about Ibenge’s list was the fact that it only included five Africa-based players (four from TP Mazembe and one from AS Vita Club). The remaining 19 members of the squad were all based in Europe and the Middle East. Besides, no one among those 19 players based outside the continent played regularly with a top European club. The two head coaches, Christian Nsengi Biembe and Hector Cuper, who have succeeded Florent Ibenge since August 8, 2019, have faced the same selection dilemma. This team selection points to a more serious problem in Congolese, and almost all African, football: *the lack of sport development in Africa and the consequent persistent lack of competition for national team positions*. One could well label this problem the “death of Florent Ibenge’s dream” of building a 1972–1974 national team type, wholly composed of DRC-based players who, for two years, dominated teams such as Morocco, Ghana, and Cameroon who often fielded proven Europe-based players in their African Cup of Nations and World Cup qualification matches.

Moreover, like several other African countries, DRC continues to suffer from the persistent brain drain of its soccer talents. Several players born in DRC as well as most of the sons of the Congolese diaspora, who have had successful careers in top European clubs and leagues, have opted to play for their parents’ host countries, thus in the process, abandoning the land of their ancestors. The list of these players includes, among others, Steve Mandanda, the Loukaku brothers, Christian Benteke, Steven Nzonzi, and so on.

While these types of stories tend to capture our imagination, especially in books and journals or even news articles, millions of interesting and fascinating experiences of football players, league and team managers, fans, and so on, from all corners of the country, often go unnoticed. As a result, what is referred to as “Congolese football” tends to downplay the important role played by the sport in the lives of the so-called ordinary Congolese people. Therefore, in an attempt to rectify these types of misconceptions, let us begin this chapter with a philosophical disclaimer.

## WHAT “CONGOLESE (DRC) FOOTBALL” MEANS

There is a tendency to restrict the use of the phrase “Congolese football” to the achievements of a few star players, coaches, or club presidents. It is, thus, customary to encounter through news articles, books, or online chronicles, the stories of the successes and failures of, for example, the 1968 and 1974 national teams or such star players as Paul Bonga, Joseph Loukaka (of Orleans), Julian Kialunda, Kibonge Mafu “Seigneur,” as correctly profiled by Ngimbi Kalumvueziko (2015), Pierre Kalala, Mukuna “Trouet,” Kakoko Etepe (“Dieu du Ballon”), Muntubile (“Santos”), Ndaye Mulamba, Bwanga Tshimen, and so on. While these players and teams, who may have shaped the national and international image of the sport, deserve to be praised for their contribution to the development of the rich football tradition of the country, it would be a mistake to underestimate the value of the stories of millions of children, high-school and university students, parents, fans, and even uninterested members of society whose lives have been changed, for better or worse, by football. As Leonard Harris correctly notes,

Valorizing historical figures is as misleading as leaving important historical figures silent. In this tradition, to deny that our decisions are normative choices is as misleading as contending that the voices we select provide a true picture of all the relevant conversations of the past. (Harris 2002, 6)

Therefore, in the ensuing section, an attempt is made to offer, as suggested by Leonard Harris above, a glimpse of the depth of Congolese football construed as a mosaic and progressive tradition.

Also, one wonders whether approaching social and cultural practices, such as football matches, from a nationalistic perspective, would have moral force, particularly if the kind of nationalism which such an approach might call for is not clearly articulated. In other words, one wonders whether it would make sense to evaluate the successes or failures of the entire Congolese nation through the experiences of a few national representatives on the African and world stages of football, especially since such a task might only be achieved through a fairly narrow set of characteristics such as successes or failures in qualifying for the World Cup, reaching the final of the FIFA Club World Cup, or winning the African Cup of Nations.

Hence, perhaps one would be better off arguing that one way to stop the current growing sentiment toward the cultivation of various forms of

questionable nationalism is to promote the elevation of cosmopolitanism over patriotism through narratives which would not only de-emphasize but also downplay the value of the successes and failures of a few representatives on the African and world football stages. In so doing, one could avoid the paradox of trying to distinguish between promoting a more pluralistic understanding of the kinds of national football narratives that can be validated and legitimated and the fallacy of attempting to measure the worth of these narratives through the successes and failures of a few national representatives.

Therefore, in the ensuing section, an attempt is made to provide a sample of football narratives from the non-national representative perspective. Here, we plan to show that since any attempt to measure football successes or failures through national team performances or those of the country’s representatives in the African and world club competitions is mostly implausible, in principle, Congolese football authorities and investors ought to focus their efforts into building political and socio-economic spaces which would ensure that players, from all corners of the country as well as all walks of life, have the opportunity to forge rewarding football careers within the local, regional, and national competition environments.

Moreover, it is perhaps worth pointing out that Congolese football might well be better off if it were to be judged based on the level of participation achieved by the country’s general population. Since football offers a platform for the promotion of such benefits as good health, hard-work, friendship, companionship, respect for teammates and opponents, and so on, DRC football authorities and investors ought to emphasize these benefits by encouraging participation at all age levels. Those familiar with Congolese football are well cognizant of the fact that, unlike several other African countries, stadium spectatorship, for example, especially in major cities such as Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, Kisangani, Mbuji-Mayi, Kananga, and Bukavu, has grown exponentially as the populations of these cities have expanded exponentially over the past few years. On the other hand, the lack of physical exercise facilities or even the sheer absence of empty lots which could, on occasions, be turned into playing spaces continues to hamper participation and physical health activities. Therefore, the promotion of participation through the development of playing fields might, for instance, help address the issues created by, as Peter Alegi correctly points out, “the shared patriarchal assumptions of European and African cultures [which have so far] curtailed sporting opportunities for

African women” (Alegi 2010, 4). Here, the Kabila government’s plan to build municipal stadiums across the country seems to be an encouraging starting point.<sup>2</sup>

### THE CONGOLESE LIVED FOOTBALL EXPERIENCES<sup>3</sup>

In DRC, football means different things to different individuals and communities. Generally, it has brought happiness to some members of society and sadness to others, wealth to some and poverty to others, temporary mental exhilaration to some and mental anguish to others, peace to some communities, and division to others. Let us imagine a child born and raised in Tsinga-Ngedi, a village in the District of Tsanga-Sud, Bas-Congo, in the late 1960s. The football experience of such a child could be a testament to the healing and educational power of football as well as to its misuse. His first encounter with the beautiful game came to him through the colorful narratives offered by the voices behind the microphones. The national radio was, then, the only window into his magical world of characters who could run faster than Cheetahs, leave their opponents dead on the ground by one simple dribble or fake, score from impossible angles, and so on. The little boy sometimes thought of himself as capable of replicating every move that the charming voices of such sports reporters as Paul Basunga Nzinga, Lucien Tshimpumpu wa Tshimpumpua, and Kabulo Mwana Kabulo (in French), Mosete Mbombo (in Lingala), and Wanani Wanesinda (in Kikongo) had described in their most vivid and colorful language.<sup>4</sup> Hence, he would spend countless hours, on dusty and muddy roads as well as rough and uneven grass-like fields, practicing his craft which he was convinced matched the brilliance of his imaginary characters. As a result, in elementary school, at the Catholic Boarding school in Khesa, Vaku, he attained “fame” under the nickname “Diantela,” named after a midfielder player from his favorite childhood team: AS Vita Club of Kinshasa. As those with similar experiences could attest, football

<sup>2</sup>In the past few years, several municipal stadiums have been built.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, photos of Demata’s students posted by Didem Tali of Al Jazeera in “The healing powers of football in the DRC: Against the backdrop of a brutal civil war, millions of Congolese turn to football to cope with the conflict,” published at <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2017/2/14/the-healing-powers-of-football-in-the-drc/>, retrieved December 20, 2019.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, the article entitled “Un dimanche de foot a la radio,” published by Messager on June 9, 2011, at [www.Mbokamosika.com](http://www.Mbokamosika.com), accessed on March 28, 2017.

playtime became almost the only moment of relaxation and recreation after the grueling daily schedule of the Belgian missionary Catholic education of the time. There were times when the young boy even thought of himself as a “Vclubien,” that is, a supporter of AS Vita Club by birth. Such is the experience, and it is a Congolese football experience, of millions of elementary school children who, for example, live in small villages across the countries or even refugee camps spread across East DR Congo.<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, let us imagine that, some years later, now in middle school at the Catholic Boarding School in Mbata-Siala, located in what some people would characterize as the “middle of nowhere,” our young boy had to rely on football for relaxation, recreation, and stressbusting. Having become a goalkeeper, here, he gained “fame” under the nickname “Balonga Bekao,” once again named after the goalkeeper of his beloved AS Vita Club. For such a boy and his schoolmates, an afternoon without football almost amounted to the torture inflicted on them by the school administrators. In fact, as middle school students, those young boys were not only required to complete a very rigorous class curriculum, but they were also tasked with helping raise their new classroom building from the foundation up. Among others, their duties included carrying heavy loads of bricks, sand, and cement. Therefore, after hours of extremely demanding curricular and extra-curricular tasks, football time was almost a blessing from the sky. Without football, one could argue, some of those young students could have gone insane. This experience of football as a saving grace has always been an integral part of the Congolese football experience. Here, one could safely claim that those boys’ middle school experience might well be consistent with what, for instance, Peter Alegi (2010, 4) has referred to as “the Catholic rendition of muscular Christianity, encapsulated by the Latin phrase *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body), [which] found a receptive audience among the Belgian [colonial and post-colonial] authorities” and missionaries.

The Congolese football experience appears to be even more complex in the country’s major cities. In Kinshasa, for example, as one of the world’s football-crazy cities, passion for football often runs wild concerning participation in recreational football as well as spectatorship at the two major

<sup>5</sup> See, for illustration, photos included in the article titled “Football fuels friendships in the DR Congo,” published at [www.FIFA.com](http://www.FIFA.com) on May 17, 2019, at <https://www.fifa.com/who-we-are/news/fri-175-pending-fifa-foundation-piece-cjp-congo-dr-3025293>, retrieved on December 20, 2019.



stadiums: *Stade des Martyrs* and *Stade Tata Raphael*. Likewise, in the afternoons and early evenings on weekdays as well as all day long on weekends, the streets of the city often turn into football pitches despite all the inconvenience imposed by these players on drivers and neighbors longing for quietude. From the sandy and dusty walkways of Lemba-Foire to the greenish football fields of the *Institut de la Gombe* (formerly Athénée de la Gombe), children and youth of all ages compete for every inch of space available on streets, back alleys, or school sports fields. The friendships and companionships which often arise out of these structured or unstructured activities have been shown to endure beyond all the challenges brought about, on occasions, by unnecessarily fierce competition. As a matter of fact, several players or even spectators who often took part in those sporting events still bear some residues of the scars borne out of some misconceptions of these street football competitions, which often resulted in broken lips, red eyes, and insult exchanges. However, the players, oftentimes, quickly made peace and were back on the pitch only hours after these types of incidents had occurred. Such was and continues to be the healing power of Congolese football. These are, indeed, Congolese football experiences that, unfortunately, often go unnoticed by the media and sport theorists across the country.

Here, once again, let us imagine a high-school student nicknamed “Technician” or “Lunangu Pélé” who lived and played football in Kinshasa-Livulu, Lemba-Foire, or Limete in the 1970s. Such a young man would face head-on several contradictions typical of Congolese football. Blessed with natural talents, he would have the fortune of being featured as a guest player in several youth teams at multiple youth tournaments across the city. For example, with FC Lisano, an elite youth club based in Kinshasa-Limete, he would witness, from the pitch, the passion of Congolese fans, as his team had been invited to open for two of the most anticipated matches of the mid-1970s at the city main stadium, *Stade Tata Raphael*, later renamed Stade du 20 Mai by the Mobutu regime. On those occasions, those matches would bring together, on the one hand, two African Cup Champions winners, AS Vita Club and Haffia Conakry, and, on the other hand, the derby of Kinshasa between FC Imana (currently Daring Club Motema Pembe) and FC Dragons (also once renamed FC Bilima). Because those types of matches often featured some of the most celebrated African footballers of the time such as Kibonge “Seigneur Gento,” Mayanga Maku “Good Year,” Kakoko Etepe “Dieu,” Kidumu “Raoul,” Ndaye Mulamba, Libilo Boba, Petit Sory, Chérif Souleymane,

“Le Roi” Mokili Saio, and so on, our young player, like most of the Congolese elite young players at that time, would dream of the day he would be entrusted with the responsibility of representing those elite teams in the Congolese or African elite competitions. Such a dream, however, would turn out mostly to be unattainable or even undesirable. Indeed, in the 1970s, most aspiring young players were often discouraged by their parents in their attempt to pursue a career that would, ultimately, have led them to a life of poverty and total dependence on remittances. In fact, despite all their fame, the absence of a professional career path framework in DRC football almost guaranteed that most of the Congolese star players in the 1970s would be left to survive on donations and remittances from club managers, relatives, and politicians.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the lack of genuine prospects for a better life through football leads most aspiring elite young players to either choose school over football or simply emigrate to Europe or the Middle East despite all the challenges that such a decision would have entailed.<sup>7</sup>

Congolese football has also been instrumental in shaping the destiny of Congolese higher education institutions. For example, in the early 1980s, one could argue that football, perhaps alongside two other equally powerful Congolese institutions, school and music, may have been responsible for keeping the fragile peace and unity forged by President Mobutu’s dictatorship on most college and university campuses. To appease the tense political environments of these campuses, higher education administrators had to rely heavily on football. For example, on the campus of the University of Lubumbashi, students were provided with the opportunity to participate in both recreational and competitive football matches. As we indicated above, because many elite young players often chose school over

<sup>6</sup>The most rewarding remittances some Congolese star players may have received for decades came under what was then referred to as “don presidential” (presidential gift).

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, among others, Carl-Gustaf Scott (2015), John Bale (2004), Nlandu (2017, 15), Paul Dietschy (2006), Richard Elliott and John Harris (2014), Richard Giulianotti and Roland Robertson (2009), and Peter Alegi (2010). As Peter Alegi puts it: “The increasing visibility of African players, however, could not mask discrimination against them. Racism in France manifested itself in different ways. For example, wage inequities long affected Africans, especially in the first years of their careers. At stadiums across European fans sometimes heaped racial insults on black players, waving bananas and making monkey sounds—a practice that is still far too common today” (p. 84). In addition, see the article entitled “Foot-Belgique: Matumona Zola dénigré par le président de son club <http://www.radiookapi.net/sport/2007/11/01/foot-belgique-matumona-zola-denigre-par-le-president-de-son-club/#sthash.8otdqEjl.dpuf>”.

the uncertainty of a football career, most higher education competitions often brought together elite players worthy of a national league or national team selection. Hence, at the University of Lubumbashi, for instance, four layers of football competition sought to excite and entertain players and supporters on campus and across the city and Katanga Province during each academic year. First, students could compete in the Residence Halls Cup. Here, team selection was restricted to demonstrated residence hall membership. Second, students had the option of playing with their college or school of registration in the University Cup. In that competition, the Faculty of Natural Sciences, Faculty of Letters, Faculty of Social Sciences, and so on competed against each other, sometimes, in front of thousands of supporters at the *Stade de la Victoire*. Third, the province Governor organized the Higher Education Cup in which various colleges fought mostly for pride and bragging rights. Finally, for the elite players who wished to compete at the highest level of competition in the city but were unable or chose not to join the other elite teams which competed in the *Association de Football de Lubumbashi* (AFLU), which featured such giants of Congolese football as TP Mazembe, St. Eloi Lupopo, and Lubumbshi Sport, the league provided the students with the option of registering a team, under the name FC Kassapards, in either the first or the second division.

Imagine a student who competed under the nickname “Rumm,” at each one of those four layers of college football. Besides, he also competed in the AFLU second division with FC SNEL (Société National d’Electricité) and first division with FC Salongo (formerly National Police). Later, after retiring from competitive football, he regularly took part in the Sunday morning adult “friendly” matches, which often preceded a trip to Stade Mobutu Sese Seko for the weekly featured national team or league match. Such a student or university graduate could competently attest to the invaluable health and social benefits as well as, on occasions, the foolishness associated with Congolese football.<sup>8</sup> Amidst growing political tensions which, sometimes, lead to violent on and off-campus battles fought along tribal or regional lines, football often offered an oasis of sanity and respect for human dignity far beyond the reach of almost all the other Congolese institutions (police, army, government, religions, etc.) except for perhaps Congolese Music.

<sup>8</sup>The writer of this chapter had both the privilege and misfortune of experiencing Congolese football up close at several levels.

On another plane of Congolese football, spectatorship at stadiums has often generated contradictions. Every major Congolese city has its valued derbies, which, on occasions, have not only brought about joy and excitement to those present at these stadiums but also loss of spectators' lives and the destruction of neighborhoods. In Kinshasa, for example, while no serious sports fan would wish to endure the agony of going through an entire football season without the game between AS Vita Club and Daring Club Motema Pembe (DCMP), this *derby de la Capitale* has always carried with it the potential for loss of life and destruction of either neighboring properties or those belonging to game officials, players, and leagues administrators. Likewise, over the years, the games between TP Mazembe and St Eloi Lupopo, in Lubumbashi, and SM Sanga Balende and AS Bantoue, in Mbuji-Mayi, or those which have pitted these big clubs against each other in the national Super League, have presented the same potential for violence.<sup>9</sup>

For example, on Monday, June 26, 2017, FC Renaissance, a rising club in the DRC Super League at the time, was relegated to the lower division due to its failure to control its coaching staff and fans after the team lost to AS Vita Club by 2-1 following a 90th-minute goal. The club president, coaching staff, and fans were guilty of field invasion which led to a battle between them and the city police. Because of the immense pressure felt by the game officials during most games of the DRC Super League, several Congolese referees, for example, are forced to make incorrect decisions which often lead to their being either suspended or simply banned by the DRC Football Association.

In conclusion, one could argue that, over the decades, Congolese football has, for the most part, successfully played its role as a platform for recreation, relaxation, entertainment, and peacebuilding. Although it still lags far behind many other nations in terms of infrastructure and organization designed primarily for participation, one could argue that it has delivered so far more social goods than almost all the other Congolese institutions, formal or informal.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, the article entitled “DR Congo halts football over fears of political violence,” published on December 15, 2016, at <http://www.bbc.com/sport/football/38316676>, accessed on March 28, 2017; also, “Division I: 15 morts après la rencontre V.club-Mazembe,” published at [www.radiookapi.net/sport/2014/05/11/division-15-morts-21-blesses-apres-la-rencontre-vclub-mazembe-officiel#sthash.yM9WJuWc.dpuf](http://www.radiookapi.net/sport/2014/05/11/division-15-morts-21-blesses-apres-la-rencontre-vclub-mazembe-officiel#sthash.yM9WJuWc.dpuf).

## CONGOLESE FOOTBALL AT THE ELITE CLUB AND NATIONAL TEAM LEVEL

The DRC could be regarded as the epitome of the highs and lows of African soccer. It appears that no other country in Africa has lost so much of its resources, both human and natural, to other nations and gained so little from the global community due to political instability, economic mismanagement, and philosophical alienation of its people. One could point to the constant disappointing performances of the national team in the African Cup of Nations and FIFA World Cup competitions as evidence of these shortcomings. These underperformances appear to point to a much deeper challenge involving the crippling dilemma created by the national team coaches' overreliance on professional players based outside Africa. Since the rise of this phenomenon in the late 1970s, many sport theorists have cast doubt about the commitment of national players whose lucrative club contracts appear to be inconsistent with the demanding schedules of CAF and FIFA competitions. Also, political interference in the operations and management of the national team affairs, as well as those of the national and local leagues, continues to prove to be a challenge for success on the pitch. This section seeks to explore some social, political, economic, and cultural complexities of football in the DRC and the pivotal role played by both the public and the private sectors which tend to either enhance or paralyze the beautiful game in this football-crazy country.

Several historians of African football such as Peter Alegi (2010), Laurent Dubois (2010), David Goldblatt (2006) as well as several other scholars from a variety of academic disciplines (see, e.g., Armstrong and Giulianotti 2004) have offered credible accounts of the origins of African football. According to Peter Alegi, in DRC, “a whites-only *Ligue de Football du Katanga* began in May 1911 in the copper-mining town of Elisabethville (today Lubumbashi)” (Alegi 2010, 3). In Leopoldville (today Kinshasa), *La Fédération du Football Association du Pool* was established in 1912.

These scholars of the history of African football have also documented how, in the 1920s, football became an integral part of the physical education curriculum of schools established by European missionaries. Throughout the continent, soccer clubs founded mostly by missionaries, colonial administrators, and the emerging African elites blossomed, culminating in the establishment of some of the current big African clubs. This is also the case for Congolese football. Clubs such as Tout Puissant Mazembe (formerly known as Tout Puissant Englebert) and Association

Sportive Vita Club, Daring Club Motema Pembe (DCMP, formerly FC Imana), and so on, which have dominated Congolese football over the years, can be traced back to colonial Africa. From the 1920s to the late 1950s, Congolese football grew in stature as these big clubs slowly developed their unique playing styles.<sup>10</sup> For better or worse, some of these big clubs incorporated some elements of the African traditional games and rituals in their pre-game and game routines. While some teams opted for entertaining and showboating styles which led to the development and worshipping of a few star players (e.g., in the cases of AS Vita Club and DC Motema Pembe), others became well known for their direct playing styles designed for cohesive and efficient teamwork (e.g., TP Mazembe). Among the rituals of traditional societies which were conserved by most teams and which remain a hindrance to the development of football in DRC, and several other African countries, is *fétichisme*, the belief that one could defeat his or her opponents through recourse to some alleged spiritual, not physical, abilities.<sup>11</sup> As Peter Alegi (2010) correctly notes, “the incorporation of magicians and healers, the rise of different playing styles, the performance of various rituals of spectatorship revealed that football was taking on distinctive indigenous characteristics” (15).

Moreover, after gaining its political independence in 1960, following a bloody revolt against the Belgian colonial administration, new challenges emerged. Several social and political leaders sought to take advantage of the unifying power of football to reshape the new realities created by colonialization and ethnic disunity. While political divisions grew wider, in the years which preceded and followed political independence, football had the potential to serve as a platform for political unification and reconciliation. Unfortunately, as Alegi (2010) accurately points out, Congolese football, like most of African football, continues to be organized along the lines of class and “ethnic divisions” as well as “social cleavages” inherited from colonial times (62–63).

In 1963, having become a member of the Confederation of African Football (CAF), which had been established in 1957 as a forum for

<sup>10</sup>For the history of TP Mazembe, founded in 1939, see [www.TPmazembe.com](http://www.TPmazembe.com); for AS Vita Club, founded in 1935, see [www.banavea.com](http://www.banavea.com). For the role played by the Belgian Catholic missionary Raphael de la Kethulle (1890–1956) in Kinshasa (formerly Leopoldville) and Father Gregoire Coussemont in Lubumbshi (formerly Elisabethville) in the history of Congolese football, see, for example, Peter Alegi (2010, 23).

<sup>11</sup>During the 2016–2017 national league competition, several teams and players were fined for *pratiques fétichistes*.

pan-Africanism and African unity, the newly independent DRC joined other African nations which increasingly sought to distance themselves from their colonial powers. As a result, like those from other nations caught in the “revolutionary” mood of the time, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, DRC political leaders adopted nationalistic and ideologist policies which turned out to be incompatible with the development of football at the world elite level. Among other things, they nationalized most of the football infrastructures and leagues because they argued, privatization, within the capitalistic framework, amounted to a denial of the social good.<sup>12</sup>

As Paul Dietschy remarks in his section entitled “Football according to Mobutu” (87–88), after witnessing the humiliating defeat of his national team against the Black Stars of Ghana by a 3-0 score during a friendly match played in January 1966, in which the Ghanaian players engaged in unnecessary showboating, President Mobutu opted to turn the national team into a prestige fighting unit. Placing the national team under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Sports and Youth, he ordered the return of all Congolese players stationed in Europe, especially, Belgium. Dispatching representatives to Eastern Europe to recruit “competent” coaches, President Mobutu’s policy shift culminated in the Simba’s victory over the Black Stars of Ghana (1-0) in the final of the 1968 African Cup of Nations held in Ethiopia. Convinced that his decision to turn the national team into a political tool had been vindicated, President Mobutu brought even more radical reforms by nationalizing, in what became to be known as *Zairianization*, all the football infrastructures and institutions alongside all the major economic and political institutions of the country in 1973.

Thus, among other decisions taken under the guise of the “*Recourse to Authenticity*,” the names of the country, currency, and river Congo were changed to Zaire. In football, the national team, formerly known as the Simba (Lions), became the Leopards. The national anthem and flag were redesigned. The two major stadiums in Kinshasa were renamed from *Stade Tata Raphael* (named after the Belgian missionary who built it) to *Stade du 20 Mai* (date of the inauguration of Mobutu’s political party, the *Movement Populaire de la Révolution* [MPR]) and *Stade Reine-Astrid* to *Stade du 24 Novembre* (date of Mobutu’s coup d’état in 1965); in

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Peter Alegi (2010), pp. 55–56, for an extended list of sport infrastructures renamed after the dates and names deemed historical by the post-colonial African governments.

Lubumbashi (formerly Elisabethville), the stadium was named after Mobutu himself. Likewise, all the teams with names from pre-colonial times were ordered to find “authentic” African ones. Thus, for example, TP Englebert, FC Dragons, FC Himalaya, and FC St Eloi became, respectively, TP Mazembe, FC Bilima, FC Ruwenzori, and FC Lupopo. As one could predict, after the overthrow of the Mobutu regime, all the stadiums’ original names were promptly restored or changed to reflect the Kabila government’s view of political independence. In Kinshasa, for example, the *Stade du 20 Mai* regained its original name (*Stade Tata Raphael*), *Stade du 24 Novembre* was named *Stade Cardinal Malula* in honor of the reconciliatory role the Cardinal played in the years of the transition from President Mobutu to President Laurent D. Kabila. In Lubumbashi, *Stade Mobutu Sese Seko* is currently referred to as *Stade Kibassa Maliba*, named after a longtime political leader of the Katanga province.

The catastrophic economic consequences caused by the *Zairianisation* remain so far inestimable. However, one would be foolish to deny the impact of such nationalistic policies on long-term foreign investors. DRC which, alongside many other nations, adopted such disastrous “revolutionary” policies, continues to struggle in the attempt to restore trust and confidence among global investors.

### THE GLORIOUS YEARS OF CONGOLESE FOOTBALL

It is well documented that DRC dominated African club and national team football from 1967 to 1974 as TP Mazembe (in 1967 and 1970) and AS Vita Club (in 1973) won the Champions Cup and the national team the African Cup of Nations in 1968 and 1974. TP Mazembe also finished as runner-up in the Champions Cup in 1968 and 1969 as the team reached the final in four successive years. However, the unprecedented mass exodus of players toward Europe and the Middle East which began in the mid-1970s may have led to the persistent weakening of local and national leagues to the point where, today, national team selection has become barely competitive. Perhaps the resurgence of Congolese club soccer in recent years which appears to coincide with the development of a very competitive national league could be a positive step in the right direction.

Despite its dominance of African club and national team football in the late 1960s and early 1970s, DRC has also become infamous due to its poor performances at the 1974 World Cup in Germany. Some football



scholars such as Simon Kuper (2006) and Paul Dietschy (2006; 2013) have construed this event as a turning point in African football.<sup>13</sup> In fact, following Morocco who had represented the continent in Mexico in 1970, DRC (formerly known as Zaire) failed to win a single match in Germany in 1974, losing its three group games while conceding 14 goals and scoring none in the process. Many football critics have wondered whether these underperformances could be blamed on the amateur or semi-professional status of the Congolese players who had to compete against European and South American teams which fielded some of the most talented and experienced professional players of the time. One could also raise interesting questions concerning the players' compensation demands which preceded their second and third group games. Could these team underperformances perhaps be attributed to low morale among the players and coaches? Could they be simply the result of poor preparation? Could they have been caused by political interference or unrealistic expectations? While the answers to these questions are, definitely, complicated, it appears that the Zairean FA opted, instead, to promote the exodus of their best talents toward Europe and the Middle East. As a result, since 1976, the Congolese national coaches have mostly selected European and Middle East-based players for continental and world competitions. Was this the right move? Could Congolese football have been better off if the sports authorities had instead invested heavily in local football development?

One would be hard-pressed to deny the fact that, for two years, between 1973 and 1974, DRC (Zaire) dominated every major African competition while fielding only DRC-based players. AS Vita Club of Kinshasa won the club champions' title after defeating Asante Kotoko of Kumasi, Ghana, in the final (2-4 and 3-0). The national team, newly named *The Leopards*, after President Mobutu's legendary hat and cane, and under the guise of the politics of recourse to authenticity, won the African Cup of Nations held in Egypt. They also qualified for Germany in 1974 after eliminating, in the final round, Morocco, which had represented Africa with minimal

<sup>13</sup>We regard the Zaire (DRC) experiment of 1973–1974 as a turning point in African soccer. As a matter of fact, the decision to only select DRC-based amateur players was prompted by the performances of its Europe-based professional players during the 1972 African Cup of Nations held in Cameroon. DRC lost to Mali (3-4) in the semifinals after some sloppy defending by its central defenders led by Julian Kialunda of Anderlecht of Belgium. As stated in the paper, the experiment succeeded up until the country poorly performed at Germany 1974. An unprecedented mass exodus of African players toward Europe and the Middle East ensued.

success at Mexico 1970. Relying upon a foundation provided by three of the major clubs in the country, the Congolese national team epitomized the type of cohesive unit necessary for teams competing at the highest levels of African and world soccer competitions.<sup>14</sup> Here, one wonders about the country’s failure to replicate such a successful model. Could it, realistically, be replicated in the face of the shift in attitude, from fame for the sake of it to a fortune-first mentality, within the world of elite football, which appears to have occurred over the last four decades? Here, one could characterize the Leopards of those glorious years as firm believers in untainted fame, pride, loyalty, and patriotism at a time when they could have easily sought political asylum anywhere across Europe. Here, one could also argue that, perhaps, those players may have been either naïve or simply ignorant of the social and economic value of their soccer talents. Scholars such as Paul Dietschy (2013) and David Goldblatt (2006) have attributed those Leopards’ willingness to stay at home to President Mobutu’s intimidation tactics.<sup>15</sup> Notwithstanding their naivety, ignorance, and/or fear of political persecution, however, the Leopards of the late 1960s and early 1970s might deserve praise and recognition for their willingness to embrace the love of the beautiful game as well as the need to foster the internal goods of football over the fortunes they might have obtained through political asylum across Europe. As Nlandu (2017) has suggested, DRC football might be much more competitive on the African and world stages if the country could provide its young talents a path to a football professional career within their natural environments as well as attract the sons and daughters of its diaspora spread across the world. As Nlandu puts it:

For the sake of argument, let us, for example, envision the prospects of a World Cup Congolese national team featuring, among others, the likes of

<sup>14</sup>In the first team, four defenders, including the goalkeeper, came from TP Mazembe, four from AS Vita Club, and three from CS Imana (today’s Daring Club Motema Pembe). As a result, Zaire played as a team, that is, a cohesive unit.

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Steve Charnock’s “The Dark Story of Zaire’s 9-Nil Defeat In The 1974 World Cup,” published at <https://www.history.co.uk/article/the-dark-story-of-zaires-9-nil-defeat-in-the-1974-world-cup>, retrieved on December 8, 2020, and Simon Lillcrap’s “Exposing The Myth: Why Zaire’s Infamous 1974 World Cup Free-Kick Was Far From Comical,” published at <https://www.thesportsman.com/articles/exposing-the-myth-why-zaire-s-infamous-1974-world-cup-free-kick-was-far-from-comical> on June 9, 2019, retrieved on December 8, 2020.

Vincent Kompany, Christian Benteke, Romelu Loukaka, Rio Mavuba, Elikwim Mangala, Michy Batshuayi, Jason Denayer, Christian Kabasele, Jordan Lukaku, Steve Mandanda alongside Yannick Bolasie, Chancel Mbemba, Serge Bakambu, and their current teammates. In addition, let us imagine the existence of a viable Congolese professional league, which could attract not only the sons of the African diaspora but also some of the best talents from around the world. If these two conditions could obtain, then one might be justified in expecting, at least, a decent quarter-final or even semi-final appearance for such a highly talented team. (Nlandu 2017, 9)

Several questions arise here about Africa's inability to appeal to the sons and daughters of her European diaspora despite the reality that most of them struggle to attain genuine native status in their parents' adoptive countries. In our next section, let us briefly highlight some social contributions made by some of the prominent Congolese players of the national team.

### “FOOTBALL CELEBRITIES AND CHARITY NEXUS”

Unlike the well-known social contributions of their basketball compatriots such as Dikembe Mutombo, Bismarck Biyombo, and Serge Ibaka, who have been lucky to play in the NBA (the American National Basketball Association) for huge contracts, Congolese footballers' charitable work remains modest but significant. For example, the Cédric Bakambu Foundation, launched by the former Sochaux (France) and Villareal's (Spain) striker on December 12, 2019, has provided invaluable services aimed at the professional development of young people with the following five specific goals in mind, “namely youth literacy, basic education with the provision of modern educational tools, the promotion of the history of the Democratic Republic of Congo which will allow the rehabilitation of certain historic sites in the country, the promotion of new technologies by providing the beneficiaries with computer tools for learning, and sport with the endowment of sports equipment to youth clubs, as well as training sports supervisors in DRC.”<sup>16</sup> In addition, the Foundation has also

<sup>16</sup> See Rodolph Tomegah's “RD Congo: Cédric Bakambu Lance Sa Fondation,” published on December 14, 2019, at <https://www.africatopsports.com/2019/12/14/rd-congo-cedric-bakambu-lance-sa-fondation/>, accessed on March 25, 2021.

provided food baskets and school kits to orphanages and areas of Kinshasa where the most vulnerable live.<sup>17</sup>

Another charitable effort worth mentioning is the creation, on June 25, 2020, of the Leopards Foundation under the leadership of their captain Youssouf Mulumbu (former West Bromwich Albion and PSG midfielder) and Marcel Tisserand (Wolfsburg defender). As Taiye Taiwo reported on June 27, 2020, “Faced with the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting food crisis, the Leopards Foundation mobilizes and supports the most disadvantaged population, by directing its first actions aimed at people living with disabilities.”<sup>18</sup> In light of the success enjoyed by hundreds of Congolese footballers over the past decades, one wishes there were more substantial charitable efforts of this kind across the DRC.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE FUTURE OF CONGOLESE FOOTBALL

Since Congolese football, one could argue, has achieved most of its success at the local level, that is, in small and large villages, city streets and schools, military barracks, college and university campuses, and so on, a substantial investment which emphasizes participation over elite competition might yield a better aggregate of health and social benefits for all community members. Substantial investment in football infrastructure, if paired with proper educational campaigns about the invaluable health and social benefits of the beautiful game, might perhaps, someday, bring together community members of all ages and from all walks of life. Currently, the few available playing fields are often occupied by young boys and men, and, occasionally on Sunday mornings, by the old generations of men who competed, once upon a time, at some levels of Congolese football. This means that so far, for example, women and other

<sup>17</sup> See Alexis Billebault’s “L’international de foot Cédric Bakambu vient en aide aux démunis de Kinshasa: Le monde du ballon rond africain multiplie les initiatives de solidarité depuis le début de l’épidémie de Covid-19,” published on April 23, 2020, at [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/04/23/l-international-de-foot-cedric-bakambu-vient-en-aide-aux-demunis-de-kinshasa\\_6037536\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/04/23/l-international-de-foot-cedric-bakambu-vient-en-aide-aux-demunis-de-kinshasa_6037536_3212.html), accessed on March 25, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> See Taiye Taiwo’s “Coronavirus: DR Congo players launch Leopards Foundation to help compatriots,” published at <https://www.goal.com/en-us/news/coronavirus-dr-congo-players-launch-leopards-foundation-to/1avim9kw1c5l71ddhze38zwm2y>, accessed on March 25, 2021.

marginalized members of society, such as the physically disabled, have been almost left out of the Congolese football experiences discussed in the chapter.<sup>19</sup>

Notwithstanding the impact of COVID-19 on world football, in general, and Congolese football, in particular, the premature eliminations of TP Mazembe, Maniema Union, and AS Vita Club from the 2021–2022 editions of the CAF Champions League and Confederation Cup coupled with the Leopards' poor performances in their 2019 Cup of Nations, 2020 CHAN, and 2022 World Cup qualifying matches, one could argue that at the elite club and national team levels, Congolese football has exhibited discernable signs of a return to African prominence in the last years. In fact, TP Mazembe has won three Champions League titles (2009, 2010, and 2015), two Confederation Cup titles (2016 and 2017), as well as three Super Cup titles (2010, 2011, and 2016). The team also finished as runners-up in the 2013 Confederation Cup. Also, AS Vita Club finished as runner-up in the Champions League in 2014 and the Confederation Cup in 2018, whereas the Africa-based national team players have won two African Nations Championship (CHAN) titles (in 2009 and 2016). Moreover, after winning the African Champions League title in 2010, TP Mazembe represented the continent with honors at the FIFA Club World Cup. The team reached the final of the competition held in Japan after eliminating the CONCACAF (Confederation of North, Central American, and Caribbean Association Football) and CONMEBOL (South American Football Confederation) Champions. Although the team lost the final game to the European Champions League winner (Internazionale of Milan), it is worth noting here that TP Mazembe became the first team outside Europe and South America to challenge the supremacy of the European and South American teams in this competition.<sup>20</sup> Here, one wonders whether the success achieved by TP Mazembe, AS Vita Club, and the Africa-based national team could be sustained without substantial

<sup>19</sup> As a matter of fact, the women's national team has just been disqualified from the 2022 CAN qualification tournament because they failed to travel to Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, for a match scheduled to take place on Wednesday, October 20, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> In 2006, Al Ahly of Egypt defeated Club America (2-1) to finish in third place and, in 2007, Etoile du Sahel of Tunisia finished in fourth place after a 2-2 draw (4-2 on penalties) against Urawa Red Diamonds, the AFC representative. So far no AFC, CONCACAF, or OFC (Oceania Football Confederation) teams have reached the final of the tournament. One could argue, here, that this success story could be a testament to the enormous untapped potential of the African clubs.

investment from global football investors. One also wonders whether DRC could succeed in retaining its young prospects, attract the sons and daughters of its diaspora as well as any interested world stars without substantial private investment which has often been threatened by “revolutionary,” nationalistic policies of every new government. As we discussed earlier, such investment does require trust and confidence in the political system. Therefore, the Congolese government might well begin to sow the seeds for such a much-needed trustworthy political system.

Overall, in this chapter, we have argued that, if properly understood as a platform for the display of various Congolese experiences, “Congolese football” has for the most part been quite successful since its inception. This claim is supported throughout the chapter by the wide range of Congolese football experiences one can encounter at grassroots, schools, club, and national team levels. We have, therefore, argued that Congolese football could be even more successful if the Congolese government and sports administrators could work harder to expand the football pie to include the experiences of all members of society.

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