

Navigating colonialism through Sports in Portuguese Africa

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ABSTRACT

“Navigating colonialism through Sports in Portuguese Africa” aims to present a brief review of literature on the importance of sports in the African colonies/provinces of the Portuguese Colonial Empire, namely regarding the diffusion and the appropriation of sports — as a tool of colonial control and repression by the coloniser and as a tool of resistance by the colonised. The research question focuses on the fact that the colonised accepted (European) sports but also used the opportunity to resist the colonial system. The selected articles reflect on the role of colonialism and its link to the effort placed on the use of sports to promote national cohesion and identity building (coloniser) or to promote resistance (colonised). The different studies prove that football/soccer was the most practised sport in the former colonies during the Portuguese occupation.

KEYWORDS: colonialism; sports; Portuguese Africa; appropriation; identity; resistance.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of sports in Portuguese Africa during the Estado Novo, namely regarding the diffusion and the appropriation of sports for political reasons — as a tool of colonial control and repression by the colonizer and as a tool of resistance by the colonized has not been the object of specific studies *per se*. It is this angle that is the focus of this work. Football was the most easily accepted and appropriated sport by the Portuguese African territories, but it is not the aim of this work to pay specific attention to football in the context of colonialism, but to sports in general.

This article aims to synthesize the evidence found in the selected articles and consider the impact of colonialism on sports in the former Portuguese colonies or provinces¹, how it affected the different communities and their identity building mechanisms and how a specific sport was shaped by culture, politics and resistance in the different Portuguese territories.

This brief review considers journal articles that focus on sports in the former Portuguese Africa during the period of the Estado Novo. The intersection of sports with the history of colonialism is evident and has been widely written about. The texts considered for this review reflect on the objectives of the use of sports by both the colonizer and the colonized — whether to exert repression, promote cohesion, spread imperial values, strengthen identity and nation discourses and create bonds or to promote resistance and anticolonialism.

Colonialism and sports in Portuguese Africa

This brief review will focus on academic journal articles published between 2006 and 2021 that focussed on navigating through the issues of colonialism and sports during the Estado Novo and Fascism in Portugal.

The chosen texts had to be (1) academic articles published during the last 15 years; that focused on (2) sports

1 In 1951, the colonies became known as provinces: “A Lei n.º 2048 de 11 de junho de 1951 integrou o Ato Colonial na Constituição de 1933. A integração foi sobretudo formal, mantendo-se o essencial do conteúdo do Ato Colonial. [...]: 1) A integração política formal de todos os territórios sob soberania portuguesa, banindo a expressão ‘Império Colonial’ e o termo ‘colónia’ e substituindo-os por ‘Ultramar’ e ‘provincia ultramarina’” (Valério, 2021, p. 1).

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in the Portuguese colonies in Africa during the period of the Estado Novo (1933-1974); (3) the diffusion of sports in the colonies; (4) and sports as a tool of colonial control and as (5) a tool of resistance against the colonizer. defined and established that no chapters or books on the subject would be considered in this brief review.

Not much has been published about the importance of sports and its link to colonialism and sports policies of the Portuguese Estado Novo.

Studies covering the topics of sports, colonialism and resistance in former colonies of “other empires” mostly concluded that “colonial sports [...] [were] actually used as a form of resistance against colonial culture” (Anderson, 2006), discussed “Colonial Sport and the Politics of Resistance” while acknowledging that “undertones of political conflict also existed in colonial sport” (Sikes, 2019) and the “enduring negative legacy of colonialism” (Besnier, Brownell & Carter, 2019).

The initial search for articles covering sports and colonialism in the former Portuguese colonies/provinces in Africa confirmed the above. This brief review aims to lead to a reflection on the role of sports in the mentioned territories, namely focussing on the appropriation of (European) sports by the Africans, but also the importance of the political uses of sports by the colonial administration and by the colonized. An emerging corpus of academic articles (Domingos, 2020b; journals (*The International Journal of the History of Sport*, volume 35 (2018) — Sport and Colonialism in Lusophone Africa), book chapters (Domingos, 2020a), books (Domingos, 2012; Domingos & Neves, 2011; Nauright & Amara, 2022) is now enriching the research on colonialism and the history of sports related to the former Portuguese territories.

Sports challenged colonial paradigms, with its social dynamics either promoting racial segregation and implying cultural heterogeneity or contributing to build an image of unity between metropolitan Portugal and its Colonies in a quest to implement and strengthen the idea of nation.

In the Introduction to the special issue of *The International Journal of the History of Sport Africa Regional* entitled “Sport and Colonialism in Lusophone Africa” (2018), Victor Melo, Marcelo Bittencourt and Augusto Nascimento (2018, p. 293) state that “in Lusophone Africa, both colonized natives and colonists utilized sporting activities, either as strategies of subversion of colonial power or as strategies of social control to bolster colonial power”. Domingos (2020a, p. 2) reinforces this idea stating that “Contrary to a policy of cultural proximity, until the late colonial period, the state’s sports policies replicated forms of racial and social discrimination”.

“Para o bem da nação: usos políticos do desporto na Guiné portuguesa (1949-1961)” (Melo, 2017) focuses on the

political uses of sports in Guiné Bissau and the role played by Governor Sarmiento Rodrigues in the development of sports in the colony, which reduced tension in colonial relations (Melo, 2017, p. 849) and stimulated a greater identification with the idea of nation, “forging a greater sense of belonging to the ‘imagined community’ of Portugal” (Melo, 2017, p. 850). Melo (2017, p. 850) mentions Gilberto Freyre and “lusotropicalism”, whose discourse was based on the peculiarity of the Portuguese colonization, described as multiracial and less violent. Guiné Bissau was not at the level of the other colonies as far as the implementation of different sports and their practice was concerned (Melo, 2017, p. 853), due to the silence and lack of interest of the youth. To promote interest, sports activities were often associated with commemorative events and football was slowly gaining ground in the social dynamics of the colony (Melo, 2017, p. 857) and, curiously, there were events involving locals and Europeans: “A curious aspect of these events is that sometimes “civilised” activities (sport, gymnastics, physical education) were mixed with other traditional native activities, such as Indian wrestling, which even became one of the province’s symbolic sports” (Melo, 2017, p. 858).

In “Different Faces of Colonialism: Sport in Cape Verde and Portuguese Guinea”, Melo (2018) explains the differences between the colonization of the two African territories, in a text that “centres on two themes: (a) the political uses of sport by metropolitan interests and (b) the political uses of sport by local interests” (Melo, 2018, p. 297), thus responding to the defined inclusion criteria defined for this review. The author compares the context of the two colonies, whose paths were intertwined (Melo, 2018, p. 297), but also separate: Cabo Verde was at peace while Guiné Bissau was involved in full-blown colonial war. The development of sports also occurred at different rhythms, leaving Guiné Bissau far behind. Melo (2018, p. 297) states that “these differences provide a glimpse into both the plasticity of sport as a phenomenon and the specificities of colonial processes”.

With a section entitled “Political Uses of Sport: Metropolitan Interests”, Melo (2018, p. 303) mentions “the uniqueness of the Cabo Verde case” related to its own relationship with Portugal and the islands’ geographical features, questioning whether “involvement in sport [...] [could be considered] a liberating stance” as they wanted recognition not as a colony but as part of the Portuguese Colonial Empire. It was “a struggle not for national sovereignty, as such, but, rather, against being treated as a colony. In other words, they accepted the premises of nationhood but proposed eliminating the signs of differentiation that justified colonial practices” (Fernandes *apud* Melo, 2018, p. 303). Melo

(2018, p. 303) claims that “sporting events were in some way regarded as a sign of the success of Portuguese colonization [...] [and even] showed a strengthening of sentimental ties to Portugal” portrayed by the written media chronicled football matches, “exalt[ing] the Portuguese identity and nation” (Melo, 2018, p. 306).

In the section “Political Uses of Sport: Local Interests”, Melo (2018) reports “initiatives aimed at subverting the colonial power’s tendency to look down on natives”. The strategy was to prove their “civilized status” while demanding “different treatment and respect”: “while simultaneously dialoguing with a large-scale process, [the caboverdianos] found their own specific solution: rather than waiting for ‘civilization’ to come from the colonizer, they took the initiative in demonstrating that they were ‘civilized’” (Melo, 2018, p. 307). Practicing golf and cricket was proof of this strategy. The political use of sports was promoted by Amílcar Cabral in Guiné Bissau, who attempted to establish a club, which “was conceived as a strategy to open a space for political activities. [...] Amílcar viewed the initiative, then, as a way to awaken the awareness of participants of their colonial condition and to call them to participate more actively in acts of resistance”, pointing out “the importance of sport as a strategy for bringing people together” (Melo, 2018, p. 308). Cabral’s “conception of practicing sport was fully linked to his strategic vision and thought” which was based on using sport to “forg[e] a nationalist vision” (Melo, 2018, p. 310).

Nuno Domingos, in one of the first articles written on the theme of sports and colonialism in Portuguese Africa, “Futebol e colonialismo, dominação e apropriação: sobre o caso moçambicano” (Domingos, 2006) focuses on the creolization of sports, especially football and in Mozambique. Basing his research on bibliography covering sports in the British Colonial Empire, he states that most studies about sports in colonial times relate to contexts of social change (Domingos, 2006, p. 399) and researchers focussed on understanding “the use of sport as a tool to exercise power” (Domingos, 2006, p. 399). Domingos (2006) recurs to various authors like Dirks for whom “colonialism was itself a cultural project of control (1996, p. ix)”; mentioning Mangan (1992) who introduced a “bond theory”, arguing that sporting practices collaborated in the creation of ‘cultural ties’ between colonizer and colonized. The structure of these ties would determine the acceptance of the colonizers’ practices and values by the autochthonous populations, which led to a political legitimation” of the colonizer (Domingos, 2006, p. 399); and Stoddart (1988) who considered the “colonial sport as a vehicle for the transmission of ideas, beliefs, values and conventions that contributed to consolidate the imperial

mission” (Domingos, 2006, pp. 399-400). Domingos (2006, p. 401) asserts that football always allowed space for recreation, for processes of creolization regarding individual and collective movements, incorporating strong local dynamics (Domingos, 2006, p. 402). Football reigned, was played on the streets, in low income outskirts of the towns and cities (Domingos, 2006, p. 406) and in rural areas, popularized by the media (Domingos, 2006, p. 408). This contributed to its popularity and to the surge of African players known for their “expressive individuality” and creativity during the game:

As football was an activity in which creativity was a fundamental element, it was a matter of highlighting the unique capacity of the African player, no longer in relation to a model, but as an autonomous creator [...] football made it possible to highlight interpretative and creative components, to evoke images of physical power, but also to suggest mental capacity (Domingos, 2006, p. 409).

In his text “Following the ball: African soccer players, labor strategies and emigration across the Portuguese colonial empire, 1949-1975” (2013), Todd Cleveland questions the initial importance of football in the colonial process: “Africans throughout the empire embraced the game, though it remains unclear whether Portugal’s colonial regime deliberately intended soccer to “civilize” the indigenous populations” (Cleveland, 2013, p. 19). However, he recognizes the impact of the sports in the overall objectives of the Portuguese colonial empire, claiming that

soccer came to play an important role in Portugal’s campaign of cultural imperialism, a key pillar in the broader process of empire. If Europeans colonized Africa, as the maxim goes, with a gun in one hand and a bible in the other, perhaps they were also kicking along a soccer ball, a third hegemonic tool (Cleveland, 2013, p. 20).

It was during the “rudimentary leagues and in a variety of less formal, or even impromptu, matches that the African players who would one day showcase their skills in the metropole first learned the game” (Cleveland, 2013, p. 20). This text focuses almost totally on the daily lives of African football players whose talent was discovered, leading to them migrating to mainland Portugal. Cleveland (2013) goes on to explain that the “process of cultural acculturation and assimilation had actually begun prior to their arrival in the metropole” as they came into contact with Portuguese

coaches and had to move into urban areas, living in what he calls “colonized spaces” (Cleveland, 2013, p. 28). The author discusses whether geographic mobility accompanied social mobility and how athletes “navigated politically-charged environments in both the metropole and the colonies” (Cleveland, 2013, p. 37) during the colonial wars.

Em “Futebol, Racismo e Media: os discursos da imprensa portuguesa durante o fascismo e pós-Revolução de Abril” (2016), Pedro Sousa de Almeida focuses on the role of discourses regarding football in the Portuguese press “during fascism and [the] post-April Revolution”. The relevant information for this review is the part that refers to the fascism period. The text also discusses the issue of racism in football and mentions the fact that there is very little research done on the topic and thus almost no publications. Almeida (2016) acknowledges the work published by Nuno Domingos, his contribution to research on football and Portuguese society, which explore “the experiences of local populations in the face of the introduction of football in a colonial context” and how he somehow also mentions racism and how football crossed racial segregation lines in the Mozambican capital (Almeida, 2016, p.77). Almeida (2016, p. 78) highlights the role of the media as opinion makers and the fact that their racist and colonialist discourse cannot be dissociated from the fascism of the Estado Novo and the application of the censorship. The idea of glorification of the nation, of the colonial and imperial past and a more tolerant racist attitude is also implied. The text analyses the discourses of the written Portuguese press published between 1960 and 1974 in four publications. The Portuguese press reproduced the colonial ideology as expected, but the author states that Salazar’s government did not have a plan to use football as a political tool. The recruitment of African players for the national team called for the thesis of a multiracial nation, but the performance of some players was associated with their “negritude” with the emergence of the “black athlete” (Almeida, 2016, p. 82). The press sometimes used explicit racist language (Almeida, 2016, p. 83), but it is “it is pertinent to point out that the denial of racism, [...] took root in the different sectors of society. That is to say, the thesis was produced and reified that Portuguese colonialism was distinguished by the absence of any kind of racial discrimination” (Almeida, 2016, p. 84).

In “O esporte nos países africanos de língua portuguesa: um campo a desbravar”, Andrea Marzano and Augusto Nascimento (2013, p. 54) aim to “highlight the potential of research on sport in Portuguese-speaking African countries, making considerations on previously conducted studies”. A

time frame is not provided. The authors recur to published studies such as Domingos (2011) to point out the different rhythms and characteristics of each colony (Marzano & Nascimento, 2013, p. 54) and the fact that the “sport can be a field of observation of the gestation of perceptions of colonialism; of the differences between the status of whites and blacks and the collision between segmenting legal frameworks of the population and the new social relationship arising from the emergence and subsequent spread of sport” (Marzano and Nascimento, 2013, p. 54). Referring to the possibility of “social bonds in domination contexts” (Marzano and Nascimento, 2013, p. 56), they call on Marzano (2010) for whom “the sporting practices highlighted conflicts between settlers and natives, but also prejudices and divisions between the latter” (Marzano & Nascimento, 2013, p. 56), meaning during the colonial period there was always the relationship between colonizer and colonized to be considered in all aspects of life in the colonies. Considering sports in the Portuguese-speaking African countries as yet an open field, Marzano and Nascimento (2013) conclude that sports was more than “an instrument of the colonial state to discipline the masses nor a weapon favouring nationalisms and the anticolonial fight”; it was also “opportunities for diversion, sharing and conflicts” (Marzano & Nascimento, 2013, p. 68).

In “Sports in the Colonial Portuguese Politics: *Boletim Geral do Ultramar*” (2013), Melo and Bittencourt aim to discuss how the *Boletim Geral do Ultramar*,² an official publication of the Portuguese government covering issues of the overseas territories, dealt with the issue of sports. The authors point out that the “mobilization of sport by the Portuguese regime was also related to their strategies to keep possessions in Africa and Asia [...] with the purpose of exalting a supposed imperial identity, as a sign that it had constructed a ‘civilized’ nation that was the product of interracial encounters” (Melo and Bittencourt, 2013, p. 71), linking it to Freyre and luso-tropicalism, already seen in Melo (2017). In the 1940s and 1950s, the Portuguese government invested in legislation promoting sports and physical education and an “aspect regularly observed on the Bulletin’s pages is the investment in the construction and renovation of sport installations” (Melo & Bittencourt, 2013, p. 75). The *Boletim* provided some information related to sports, but the authors noted that there was a “clear mobilization of the practice in the sphere of Portuguese colonial politics, notably from the 1950s”; however, it was “not possible to notice sports mobilization by those involved with movements that opposed the colonial order” (Melo & Bittencourt, 2013, p. 79), as it was an official publication.

2 All numbers of this publication are available at <http://memoria-africa.ua.pt/Library/BGC.aspx>.

In “Associativismo, Desporto e Identidade em Moçambique (décadas de 1920 a 1950)” (2021), Aurélio Rocha aims to investigate if affirmations of identity or belonging to a shared referent called Mozambique occurred in sports associations. The author points out that sports “carries within it a potential for contestation from which actions challenging constituted powers may emerge, such an important clue for the understanding of historical, social, political and cultural events” (Rocha, 2021, p. 93), an issue relevant to this review. Sports associations were places where a true social and political conscience developed, a basis for the “construction of what Cabaço (2010: 268) defines as a ‘political strategy of unity’, thereby beginning to shake the passivity and the sleeping consciences of the ‘Mozambican community’ as a whole” (Rocha, 2021, pp. 96-97). He furthers this thought when he highlights “the emancipating role that sport played, within the scope of associativism, for the understanding of the history of the colonial period [...] [and] it was in the sports scenario that, as in other societies, manifestations of identity emerged, indicating the existence of a social conscience” (Rocha, 2021, p. 100). The recognition of African talent in sports encouraged the “the Mozambican intellectuals’ awareness-raising process in the 1940s and 1950s, shaping what Chaves (1999: 157) defines as an identity clearly committed to the emerging Mozambican nationalism, which [...] in the midst of the colonial era [...] served to construct ‘Mozambicaness’ (moçambicanidade)” (Rocha, 2021, p. 104).

Diffusion of sports: a tool of colonial control or of resistance?

The analysed articles clearly show that the colonized accepted (European) sports, but also used the opportunity to resist the colonial system; football was easily appropriated by the Africans who introduced creativity to the game and adapted it to their needs.

As mentioned by Marzano and Nascimento (2013, p. 58), the “the potential of sports practices to reveal racial tensions in colonial society” should be pointed out. Conditions between the Europeans and the colonized changed along the years, specifically after the instauration of the Estado Novo: “Until the 1920s, there was room in clubs and teams for the coexistence of settlers and the children of the land”; however, thirty years later, with the colonies becoming overseas provinces, the policies changed, “favouring the valorisation of multiracial sports teams and highlighting the participation of Africans in teams and competitions in the metropolis” (Marzano and Nascimento, 2013, p. 58). This decision impeding references to skin colour in the press and in official documents showed the overwhelming presence

of racism in a society trying to conceal it (Marzano and Nascimento, 2013, p. 59).

Melo (2017, 2018) are important contributions to this brief review and to specific cases of the Guiné Bissau and Cabo Verde, with some of the information being published before in Melo e Bittencourt (2013). Melo (2017) covers the introduction of sports in the decade or so before the beginning of the colonial war and the impact that it sports had in the cultural scene of the country contributing to the effort of implementing the idea of national identity. Commemorative occasions always included sports, and, in some occasions, traditional sports appeared alongside European sports, an attitude that the “[colonial] government supposedly respected local peculiarities, an expression of the presumed non-racial stance it adopted” (Melo, 2017, p. 858). Melo (2018) explains the peculiarities of the two colonies and how the differences between the colonization of the two territories marked the pace of the introduction and settling of sports in Guiné Bissau and Cabo Verde.

There is a certain consistency in the results obtained and most of them confirm the research question, enriching the history of sports during the colonial occupation in Portuguese Africa and enlightening the relationship between colonizer and colonized.

All the texts showed how sports was present in the Portuguese colonies/overseas provinces during the period of the Estado Novo (1933-1974) and reflected on the diffusion of sports in the colonies. Sports as a tool of colonial control and as a tool of resistance against the colonizer was covered by Almeida (2016), Cleveland (2013), Marzano and Nascimento (2013), Melo (2017), Rocha (2021), with Domingos (2006) and Melo (2018) authoring the articles that best address the issue of the political impact of sports on colonialism.

Marzano and Nascimento (2013) considered that sports could be a “field of observation of the gestation of perceptions of colonialism” where “opportunities for diversion, sharing and conflicts” (Marzano and Nascimento, 2013, p. 68) also occurred.

Melo and Bittencourt (2013) contributed with their reading of sports in the *Boletim Geral do Ultramar*, that as a state publication aimed to glorify infrastructures in the Portuguese overseas provinces and did not provide any information on the question of sports being linked to colonial control or African resistance to accomplish independence.

FINAL REMARKS

This brief review can be considered as limited evidence on the topic discussed here — the diffusion and the

appropriation of sports as a tool of colonial control and repression by the colonizer and as a tool of resistance by the colonized. However, the authors and articles studied are adamant regarding the results achieved in their own research and studies on the same topic in what concerns the British Empire (Anderson, 2006; Besnier *et al.*, 2017; Guttmann, 1988; Hutchison, 2009; Roser, 2016; Stoddart, 1988) have reinforced the achieved conclusions and discussed the negative legacy of colonialism on sports.

The study of sport is a privileged means to analyse colonial societies, the relationships between colonizers and colonized, the forms of power, the formation of social groups and the processes of exclusion and social incorporation.

Africans of the Portuguese colonies and others used and appropriated sports, especially football as a way of upholding their identity during the colonialization, but also as a way of resisting colonial rule, as a bonding opportunity in the struggle for independence defying colonialism's hubris. Sports was used for varied political reasons: as a tool of colonial control, as a tool of resistance against the colonizer, to promote national identity and social and cultural cohesion and to highlight the special relationship between the Portuguese and their colonized subjects as professed by Freyre's luso-tropicalism theory.

Future research on this topic should be considered as Sports and its impact on Portuguese colonialism and *vice-versa* is an area of study which is still relatively unexplored.

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