

The period of decolonization in the context of the development of Olympic sport in Africa

Pascal Charitas



At the April 1923 meeting of the International Olympic Committee at the Capitol in Rome, Pierre de Coubertin declared, "Sport will conquer Africa!" However, following repeated failure to set up the first African Games, his "Colonization of Sport" project was abandoned in 1930.

Many believed the responsibility for this failure could be laid at the door of the colonial powers in France and Britain.

About fifteen years later, the seeds of independence began to blossom at conferences in Brazzaville (1944) and San Francisco (1945). Within the next decade came the proclamation in France of the Overseas Reform Act of 1956 (Loi Cadre). This marked a new direction for foreign policy and redefined relations between the mother country and the newly independent nations. At the same time, the USSR asserted its anticolonialist position. It had started a policy of destalinization in the mid fifties. Thus, independence movements and peaceful coexistence led to the emergence of *alternative powers*,¹ i.e., the UN, UNESCO and the IOC, that were a focus for the aspirations of these new nations. It is necessary to consider the conditions which brought about the first African Games in 1965, the organization at the continental level of African sport with the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa (SCSA), and finally the Olympic aid which was meant for the African NOCs through Olympic Solidarity in 1972. In addition the role of the Commonwealth Games needs to be considered.

This research thus focuses on an area of Olympic history that has received little attention in French or English literature: the period of decolonization in the context of the development of Olympic sport in Africa. The developments can be examined by means of a comparative analysis of the United Kingdom and France from 1948 to 1966.

The heuristic nature and perspectives of research

While the issue of colonization has been largely addressed in publications on Humanities and Social Sciences, and that of post-colonialism has been developed over the past twenty years at least in England and over the last ten years in France, the role of sport and in particular the Olympic program, should not be ignored. Moreover, within the range of works centered on Olympic history, those devoted to studying the "actors" and to the effects of influence are very rare, apart from some English studies. Our period of interest, which spans from the "colonial" to the "postcolonial" periods, looks at the conditions in which the French and English-speaking NOCs emerged. It examines the relations resulting from colonialism between the ruling elite in African sport and

the French and English elite, as well as by comparing the two models of colonial and postcolonial Empire.

This paper therefore aims to reflect on the potential for the emergence of an Olympic African sports movement, and considers four cultural zones: French-speaking Black Africa and France, English-speaking Africa and the United Kingdom. Thus, as part of the history of international relations and sociology of elite and social networks, we examine the relations of power between the executive sport managers from Black Africa in the French and English zones and the executive sport managers from the two mother countries in the formative stage of "sport cooperation". Choosing an analytical approach in terms of the "africanization of executives" and the sociology of networks of influence provides a means of revealing the logic of alliances, conflicts and cultural integration of the executive classes by the gradual process of integration into the Olympic movement (Commonwealth Games, French-speaking Community Games, Regional Games, Olympic Games). This approach also helps to understand the procedures underlying the emergence of new NOCs in the heart of the Olympic movement. It will highlight the issues that were raised and the solutions found by the Olympic sport institution.

French-speaking and English-speaking Africa and the Olympic Movement: Why?

The next All-Africa Games are to be held in 2011. It is therefore an appropriate time to consider in depth the mechanisms which led to the creation of the first African NOCs, and how the IOC went about incorporating them into the Olympic movement. The role played by the African sports leaders in achieving this Olympic recognition and the access they had to international institutionalized sports competitions should also be examined. Some studies² have regarded the African NOCs to be identical copies of those in rich, industrialized, western countries. Whilst this is a fair assertion, it certainly cannot fully explain the formation and integration of these African NOCs or reveal the influences from which they benefitted. Thus, the essence of the relations between the various "actors" receives only a very superficial consideration. Our project aims to reconstruct a part of this reality in order to grasp the underlying socio-political implications. If these are examined within the scope of Franco-African and Anglo-African relations, they help to explain how the evolution happened in an historical context viewed from a compared perspective of the practices and methods.

This is why it is necessary to consider the origins of Olympic sport in Africa. To achieve an understanding of how the African NOCs came into being and their integration in the Olympic movement, it is necessary to consider the development aid granted to them by the IOC. From 1962, this aid, which materialized, albeit fleetingly, with the Committee for International Olympic Aid (CIOA), undergoes institutional changes until the creation of Olympic Solidarity in 1972. By this time there was already political disagreement amongst certain countries. i.e., the United Kingdom, USSR, France, etc.

Description of the research problem

The research that we are currently carrying out aims to highlight the history of the Olympic movement as a transnational factor in the creation of the African NOCs. This is done by highlighting the influence of elite sport managers' from the mother countries in the two empires: France and the Britain. It is about the different messages that come to the fore during the period of African emancipation and the fading of colonial authority. The research takes as its starting point 1948 and the London Olympic Games. It looks at the movement to integrate African countries into the Olympic movement at the same time as the cold war blocs were being formed. It then spans the period of decolonization and independence in Africa. The cut off point is 1966. By this time the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa had been established. This organization included both English-speaking and French-speaking African NOCs. The British Empire and Commonwealth Games continued to take place over the period from 1950 to 1966 and Francophone Community Games were also held from 1958 to 1965.

This project takes into account the different strategies used by the British and the French empires during the period when colonial independence was going through changes. What was the political response from the two empires? Did they differ in their responses or strategies? How were they different? The understanding of the Olympic challenge on the African continent is further informed by the history of colonial empires and their colonies and their international relations with other powers. The geopolitics of the more powerful nations come in to play as the Olympic movement is interpreted as a transnational organization in a constant state of change. It constantly sought recognition in a world which itself was undergoing radical change. This organization, known as "apolitical", questioned the link with colonialism and even more, with the emerging post colonialism.

What are the changes that made the transition from the colonial state³ to the post colonial state⁴ possible? Technical aid, "cooperation" or, neo-colonialism? In turn, what roles did the elite sport managers in French and English-speaking Africa play? What were their available resources and what means did they have to raise their nations (NOC) to the level of the Olympic movement's standards? the final consideration is how the colonial

and post colonial states interacted with a "supranational" organization such as the IOC. It revealed the interdependencies at work, thereby making attempted comparisons possible. Are European universalism and imperialism in symbiosis with the Olympic ideology?

Our approach is that of a comparative genealogical story. In order to understand how the birth occurred, we can already trace four levels of analysis throughout which ran the guiding principle of Olympic aid for the development of sport. Using these four themes enables cross checking to make sure that the final findings are reliable: the colonial/post-colonial relations, the comparison between the Jeux Francophone and Commonwealth Games, the African and the Olympic Games and the role of the African, French and English sport managers and those of the Olympic movement. ■

Notes

- 1 Here, we refer to the works on international relations theory by NYE, Joseph S., Jr.: *Soft Power: The means to success in World Politics*. Public Affairs 2004.
- 2 MBENGALACK, Elias: *La gouvernamentalité du sport en Afrique: le sport et le politique au Cameroun*. Doctoral thesis Etudes africaines, Bordeaux 1, IEP, directeur: J.-F. MÉDARD. IEP, Centre d'études d'Afrique noire, 1993.
GOUDA, Souaïbou: *Etats, sports et politiques en Afrique noire francophone : cas du Bénin, du Congo, du Niger, et du Sénégal*. Doctoral thesis Sports and Exercise Science and Technology (STAPS), Université de Grenoble 1, 1997.
- 3 BALANDIER, George: La situation coloniale : approche théorique," in: *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* (1951)11, ed. PUF, 44-79.
- 4 SMOUTS, Marie-Claude: *La situation postcoloniale*. Ed. Editions Presses de Science Po, Paris 2007.