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Footballing journeys: migration, citizenship and national identity

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ABSTRACT

Sport, in particular football, can provide a useful means through which to explore the related issues of migration and national identity. Sports stars migrate from one country to another often mirroring patterns of more widespread migration from periphery to core. Such movements are influenced by a range of factors. In an increasingly commercialised and globalised sport, the exploration of footballers' roots and the routes they take feeds into a consideration of issues of place identity and belonging. In international sporting competition, competitors don the national colours, sing the anthem and "fly the flag", and in doing so become the embodiment of the wider imagined community. Traditionally those who compete for countries have usually been born and raised there or have lived there for sizeable periods of their lives. In recent years, however, the selection by international sports teams of competitors born in other countries has become increasingly common. The use of these footballing examples provides insights into migration, diaspora, citizenship, globalisation, and the multi-layered and contingent nature of national identity. Sport can offer a useful means of illuminating these various geographic themes and socio-spatial processes, thereby rendering them more accessible and interesting to students.

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Introduction

Sport is a social and cultural practice, but one which is also a major industry. As such, it reflects, reproduces and normalises various other practices and phenomena. Consequently, sport provides a useful lens through which students can examine a range of geographical themes. The various connections between sport and place have been explored in a range of contexts (Bale, 2002; Gilchrist & Browne, 2017; Koch, 2017). In this paper, the specific foci are the related issues of male football player migration and transfers of national allegiance by footballers. Exploring these footballing examples provides insights into a range of geographic ideas and socio-spatial processes. In particular, they cast light on concepts of migration, diaspora, citizenship, globalisation, and the multi-layered and contingent nature of national identity.

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Conceptual context

Geographers have approached migration from a wide range of perspectives. Some approaches centre on a behavioural focus exploring the push and pull factors that influence migrant decision-making while other work has trained attention on the wider structural context in which migration takes place King (2012)). The migration of footballers can be viewed in terms of career advancement while also being placed within the structural frameworks in which the game is embedded. The geographic reach of the game and the widening global patterns of sports migration point towards the processes of globalisation within the game, reflected in its economic spread and its apparent widening cultural popularity (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009; Murray & Overton, 2014). Sports stars migrate from one country to another in order to advance their careers, often echoing patterns of more widespread migration from what might be regarded as peripheral regions to core areas (De Haas et al., 2019; Samers & Collyer, 2017). In an ever more commercialised and globalised sport, the exploration of football players' roots and the routes they take feeds into a consideration of issues of place identity and belonging. The sport increasingly involves a complex network of sponsors, agents and media corporations whose interests span the globe. Consequently, international flows of male players have become more ubiquitous resulting in specific leagues (particularly some of those in Europe) assuming a super-diverse character (Storey, 2011).

The routes taken by migrant footballers, either within or between countries, can be mapped and examined. These migration patterns can then be explored in order to understand the processes giving rise to those patterns through uncovering the key reasons for these moves. Geographers are also concerned with the impacts of migration, and these can be examined in relation to football – the impacts on the places players leave, the places they travel to, and the impacts on players themselves as professional sports migrants. In addition, the responses to this migration can also be explored, uncovering both positive and negative discourses surrounding the phenomenon.

Football also provides much scope for students to explore themes of identity at various spatial scales – national, regional, local. Fans may manifest a loyalty towards their local club while, at a wider scale, support for an international team feeds into and reflects broader ideas of the collective nation. Nations and the associated political ideology of nationalism underpin the configuration of the world political map and on-going conflicts over competing national claims to territory in various parts of the world serve as overt reminders of the importance of ideas of the nation and the associated ideology of nationalism (Storey, 2020a). However, as Billig (1995) has argued, nationalism is an ever-present phenomenon, and the nation is re-produced in many less obvious everyday ways. Through the flying of flags, national days of celebration and a myriad other ways national identity is constantly re-produced and reaffirmed. Sport, it might be argued, provides one of those more mundane means through which the nation is reaffirmed and it acts as a medium by which people are reminded of their identity (Koch & Paasi, 2016). At a very fundamental level, sport could be said to make the nation exist or to render the imagined community something closer to a manifest reality (Anderson, 1991; Holmes & Storey, 2011). At international football matches, the waving of flags and banners and the singing of anthems symbolises a unified collective struggling against a common adversary. Sporting achievements can be cast as one of the sets of stories, alongside historical

narratives, myths and other elements of popular culture that work as a national glue, helping to bind the nation together (Doupona-Topič & Coakley, 2010). Sporting events may be portrayed as glorious victories or heroic defeats (or as national embarrassments!) fuelling particular narratives and contributing to national myth-making and the reproduction of ideas of cultural authenticity (O’Boyle & Kearns, 2017).

Sport is thus a cultural resource that can be drawn on at particular times. Those on the sporting stage take on the mantle of representing the nation. There has been a traditional distinction between ethnic and civic nationalisms whereby national affiliation is seen either in terms of descent (ethnic-genealogical) or in terms of birth within the boundaries of the state (civic-territorial). The latter is the more inclusive as regards who can be “accepted” into the “nation”, while the former can be interpreted in a more exclusive fashion whereby one has to be part of the “appropriate” ethnic community to be seen as a member of the nation (Storey, 2012). Sport appears to blend these two so that sportspeople representing a country other than the one they were born or raised in has become a more common phenomenon. This has been particularly noticeable in men’s football where shifting regulations have allowed players to represent the country of a parent or grandparent’s birth (Storey, 2021). This reverberative causation underpins the choice to represent a country of family origin reflecting the knock-on effect of earlier migration (Jansen et al., 2018). In essence, it expands the idea of citizenship beyond a singular relationship with a state to a wider more transnational conceptualisation (Yarwood, 2014).

The paper deploys a range of examples drawn from men’s professional football to illustrate these twin themes. In doing so, it casts light on the geographical issues of identity, diaspora and citizenship raised. Such examples can be utilised to render visible what might otherwise appear like abstract social and cultural geographic ideas to students.

Sports migration

Football players have always migrated but in the early days of the professional game that movement tended to be over relatively short distances, though longer distance migration did contribute to the spread of the game in various parts of the world (Goldblatt, 2007). In recent decades, international migration of players has become a much more common phenomenon and club teams in many leagues, particularly in Europe, have become increasingly internationalised, fielding players drawn not only from elsewhere on the continent, but also from much further afield. Some of these migratory paths reflect wider population trends with movement from what might be seen as more peripheral countries (both economically and in sporting terms). As the sport’s global reach has expanded, driven in large part by commercial processes associated with television broadcasting rights and other financial imperatives, many parts of the world have become entwined into the sport’s complex networks. Professional players, and those that aspire to be so, have become increasingly embedded within a global labour market. One outcome of this is the migration of young footballing talent, as players follow increasingly familiar migrant paths. For example, most European leagues contain at least a sprinkling of African players. The migration of male professional footballers is influenced by a range of factors. These include broader historical and colonial links shaping specific migratory

routes. There has been a clear pattern of migration from north African countries to France and from various South American countries to Spain and Portugal, for example. However, there are a range of other specific factors linked to clubs' recruitment strategies with increasingly transnational networks of scouts, complex webs of football agents and the growth of footballing academies all acting to serve as conduits of talent to European clubs (Velema, 2021).

The English league structure provides one example. Here, player "imports" in the past tended to be almost exclusively from elsewhere in the UK and from the Republic of Ireland (Curran, 2017; McGovern, 2000) but this changed with the advent of the FA Premier League in 1992–93. This development was closely bound up with enhancing revenue generation from the televising of live football matches and from sponsorship. The advent of satellite television, most notably via the broadcaster Sky, led to a much-enhanced profile for the game, increasing the numbers of people who could watch live football (albeit in pubs or in their own homes rather than actually attending matches) and led to significant sums of money entering the game as clubs enjoyed enhanced revenue from the media coverage. In turn, this contributed to the inflation of players' wages, while the broadcasting of matches outside the UK heightened the profile of English clubs. These developments could be said to have made the Premier League an attractive proposition for foreign footballers as it became a much more commercialised operation with a wider global reach. Thus, while the migration of players can be seen as a consequence of the desires of individuals to improve their careers, movement occurs within the complex structures in which the sport is embedded. Students can reflect on both the behavioural and structural dimensions of sporting migration.

The commercialisation of the game also links to themes of globalisation. It is tempting to think of the migration of talent as a borderless phenomenon, reflective of broader migratory trends and characteristic of a more global world (De Haas et al., 2019). However, this does not mean that geography is redundant or that borders have disappeared from this aspect of football. There may be a general drift of players to countries with stronger leagues (Spain and Italy, as well as England) but the precise composition of such moves may also be influenced by colonial or cultural (including linguistic) linkages. Many players from countries such as Senegal, Togo, Cameroon and Tunisia play in France; while a number of South Americans play in Spain. In part this reflects both legal issues (such as work permit requirements) and "cultural" factors such as the development and popularity of football as a sport in certain parts of the world. South America, in particular Brazil and Argentina, are recognised as major footballing heartlands while recent decades have seen the steady rise of a number of African countries as forces to be reckoned with (Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire for example). This also explains why, even in these regional blocks, a relatively small number of countries dominate the player pool. Other relevant issues here include the geography of scouting networks which tend to heighten the "visibility" of players in some leagues rather than others. Many African-born players are signed from French clubs because they have grown up in France or moved there as teenagers, prior to transferring between clubs in different European countries. The social networks of players, agents and club management play a key role in shaping these migrant flows so that the routes taken by players are more restricted than might initially appear, with players being channelled within and between a limited number

of countries linked to personal contacts, social ties, recruitment networks and cultural connections (Storey, 2011). All of this suggests that, just as with migration more generally, networks of contacts come into play and help to shape the flows of player migrants across international boundaries.

The impacts of all this are varied. From the point of view of individual players, the lure of a professional career is understandable, but the numbers of those who make it to the highest levels is low. In addition to its negative impact on players, the draining of young talent from some countries in Africa and elsewhere clearly has negative consequences for the development of footballing infrastructure in those countries, making it difficult for domestic leagues to develop, as the best talent is drained away. Low wages and the lack of a significant international profile throughout most African domestic leagues (and others) acts as a powerful push factor enticing players to Europe and elsewhere, serving to further weaken those leagues. This reinforces something of a core – periphery sporting relationship viewed by some as a form of latter-day imperialism draining parts of the world of a useful sporting resource (Murphy, 2017). Again, this aptly demonstrates broader geographic issues of exploitation, inequality and development while pointing towards the wider political and economic structures within which the game is embedded (Darby, 2013).

As with migration more generally, the growing number of foreign-born footballers in European leagues has provoked some negative reactions. Foreign footballers are sometimes cast as not belonging “here” and blamed for displacing “native” workers. Clearly there are strong links here to wider debates around migration more generally in which migrants are often cast as taking “local” jobs or impeding the career prospects of indigenous workers. Such discourses also tend to echo wider debates surrounding racism and identity (Evans et al., 2020). However, more positive responses are also apparent, and the retention of a predominantly local fan base indicates a willingness to see multinational teams as continuing to represent or embody a place. Furthermore, the positive attitude which many fans display towards imported players suggests that football (like many other sports) possesses some potential to act in a socially progressive manner. Indeed, it may serve to link places together providing fans with a knowledge of a wider footballing world and connecting them to other distant places. For example, the celebrity footballing status of Liverpool’s Egyptian player Mohammed Salah suggests that exposure to players from different cultural backgrounds can lead to positive reactions and challenge reductive stereotypes (Alrababa’h et al., 2021). In the context of high levels of sporting migration, there is evidence of both a retreat into insularity by some and a broader acceptance of sporting “others” as legitimate representatives of place. Whether this is viewed in terms of traditional place connections or in terms of the internationalisation of the game, a range of geographic issues are at play here. Football is an excellent arena in which students can examine migration patterns, ideas of identity and the connections between people and place. It can be argued that the substantial in-migration of footballers to the Premier League in England, and to other European leagues, has contributed (albeit in a somewhat specific manner) to Vertovec’s (2007) idea of “super-diversity” resulting from the arrival of migrants from a wide range of geographical backgrounds, displaying wide cultural diversity and linked into complex transnational networks.

Sporting citizenship and national identity

The nation could be said to be performed and reproduced at sporting events. Therefore, students might want to consider who is deemed eligible to represent the nation on such occasions. Those donning the national colours become the embodiment of the nation (if only for the duration of a match). Just as club teams appear more cosmopolitan, international representative teams also appear more transnational with players born outside that country, but often with family connections to it, playing in the national colours. Increasing flexibility of regulations governing international representation means that countries can potentially select from a considerably broader array of talent, drawing on players with ethnic or cultural connections to the country. Place of birth, family origins and residency can be used to enlarge the player pool. The declaration of a sporting nationality that may differ from an “official” one casts light on ideas of cultural hybridity and highlights the need to see identities as somewhat more fluid and flexible. What once may have seemed relatively straightforward has now become more complex, moving away from a mono-ethnic singular sense of the nation. Historic colonial connections and persistent migration links contribute to the hybrid nature of some national teams. In football, countries such as Algeria rely increasingly heavily on their European diaspora, selecting sons of Algerian emigrants to France and elsewhere.

For many footballers and other sportspeople, family background combined with historical colonial connections provides them with options in terms of sporting citizenship. Historically, this explains France’s well-established selection of players born in African countries but brought up in France. The successful French teams of the late 1990s and early 2000s drew heavily on players from a multiplicity of ethnic and geographic origins with stars such as Lilian Thuram (born in Guadeloupe) and Patrick Vieira (born in Senegal) symbolising the geographic reach of France’s colonial empire. Their World Cup winning team of 2018 had a majority for players with close family ties to a range of African countries. Kylian Mbappé for example was born in Paris to a Cameroonian father and Algerian mother. However, a reverse phenomenon is also apparent with many African countries selecting European-born players whose family origins lie in Africa, thereby reclaiming some of the sons of their extensive diasporas. The squads for recent African Cup of Nations competitions have contained many players born outside the country they represented, mainly in Europe, the majority of them born in France. Particularly notable in this regard are the cases of Algeria and Morocco, both countries relying heavily on players born in Europe but of Algerian and Moroccan parentage. In this way, historical colonial relationships and associated migration flows provide the backdrop to the more eclectic nature of national representative teams. At the delayed 2021 European Championships, 13 European countries included players with close African family connections; conversely, over a third of the players participating in the delayed African Cup of Nations in 2022 were born and/or grew up outside of Africa, about one fifth of them in France.

The Republic of Ireland men’s football team was one of the first to push the boundaries of player eligibility as far back as the 1980s when sizeable proportions of non – Irish-born players, the sons and grandsons of Irish emigrants, began to be selected for the team (Holmes & Storey, 2011). Ireland’s extensive diaspora has continued to be drawn on in order to widen the pool of available talent. Football can also be used to demonstrate the

impacts of refugee movements resulting from war and conflict. For instance, migration out of the Balkans as a consequence of ethno-national conflict in the 1990s has resulted in players with close ethnic ties to the region representing other countries, such as Switzerland where they may have grown up. Famously, the Swiss international Xherdan Shaqiri (who was born in Kosovo and grew up in Switzerland) plays matches in boots with a Swiss flag on one and a Kosovan flag on the other, a reflection of his sense of dual allegiance. The Canadian international Alphonso Davies was born to Liberian parents in a refugee camp in Ghana while the French international Eduardo Camavinga was born to Congolese parents in a refugee camp in Angola. Students can be encouraged to investigate the biographies of sportspeople as a means of exploring the complexities of identity.

The reactions to this phenomenon can also be used to encourage students to think about different ideas of the nation. Responses to the phenomenon from supporters, media and those involved in sport range from narrow essentialist and exclusionary views of national identity to those which might be seen as more progressive, inclusionary and flexible. Reactions to the diverse backgrounds of French teams, for example, have ranged from a celebratory inclusiveness to a more narrow, exclusionary view that sees some players as not really being French. Such views fit into a far-right narrative of French-ness seemingly threatened by “others” viewed as citizen “outsiders” (Beaman, 2017). The players themselves may have a keen sense of their own identity and background. Belgium’s former captain Vincent Kompany has described himself as fully Belgian and Congolese (the country of his father), while Senegal’s French-born captain Kalidou Koulibaly has stated that he is proud of the two cultures in which he grew up. For others, the feelings may be different. Former Cameroonian international Benoit Assou-ekotta was unequivocal in his stance that Cameroon was his country, not France, despite having been born and grown up in Paris (Storey, 2020b). Players may be hailed as symbols of the nation even though their personal biographies suggest a more multi-faceted sense of identity.

The examples above, and many others, can be deployed to encourage students to think about the concept of national identity in more fluid, flexible and inclusive ways. The nation is performed and re-produced through sport where identity is on public display and the nation is represented by both players and supporters whose performance, in its variety of ways, serves to re-produce ideas of the nation. Sport provides an arena in which the nation is constantly re-affirmed, but the actors at the centre of this may increasingly be drawn from a more diverse set of ethno-national and cultural backgrounds. An exploration of this can provide valuable insights into the ways in which identity is performed, re-produced and adapted. All of this raises broader questions about the geographies of citizenship and it can be used to stimulate discussion around more flexible interpretations of the concept (Oonk, 2022; Yarwood, 2014).

Conclusions

The use of these footballing examples provides insights into concepts of migration, diaspora and the nature of identity, its multi-layered and contingent nature. In this way, sport can offer a useful means of illuminating various geographic themes and social processes, thereby rendering them more accessible and interesting to

students. While not everyone is interested in sport, it would be a mistake to ignore the insights which it potentially provides into the complex nature of national identity, territorial allegiances and the linkages between people and place. It also intersects with wider questions of politics, economy, society and culture. Ultimately, it can be suggested that football, or sport more generally, provides a lens through which society and culture can be explored. Finally, it should be noted that, while the focus of this paper has been on men's football, similar attention to other sports, both women and men, should prove useful in casting light on these geographic issues.

Disclosure statement

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