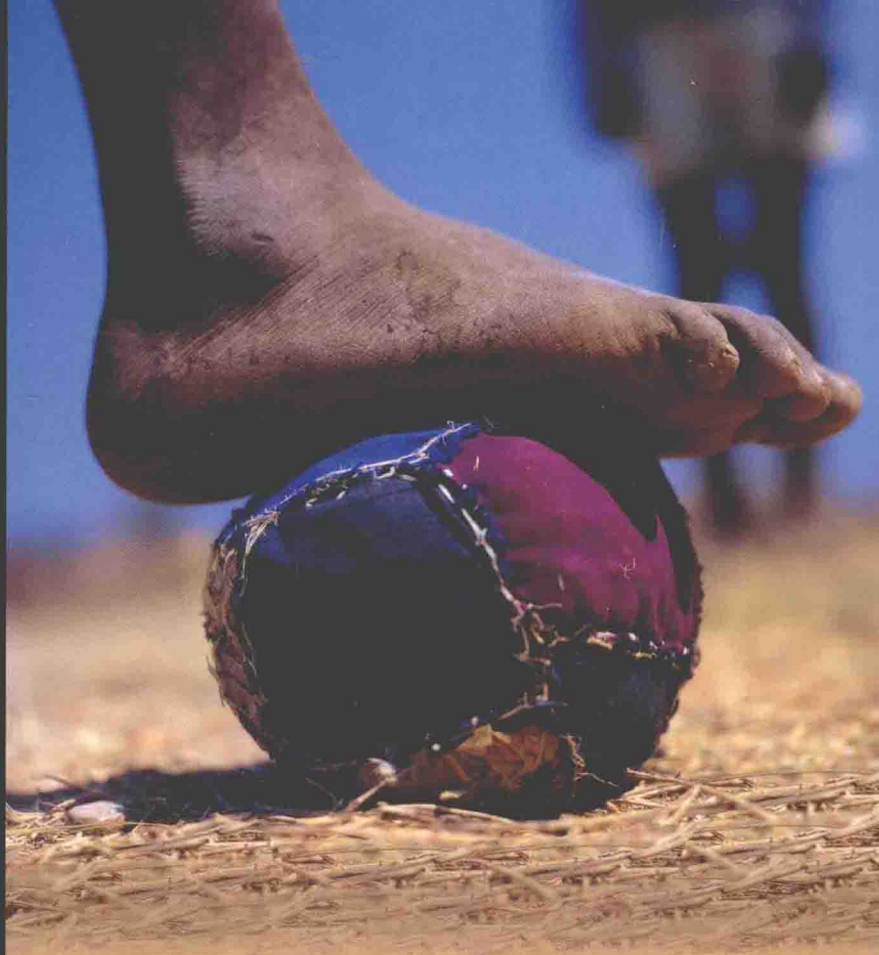


AFRICA IN WORLD HISTORY



# AFRICAN SOCCERSCAPES

How a Continent Changed  
the World's Game

PETER ALEGI

# African Soccerscapes

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How a Continent Changed the World's Game

Peter Alegi



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## Africa in World History

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To Africa's footballers, past, present, and future

## PROLOGUE

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On May 15, 2004, Nelson Mandela wept tears of joy as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) awarded South Africa the right to host the 2010 World Cup finals—the first on African soil. “I feel like a boy of fifteen,” he told the audience in Zurich. In South Africa, people of all races erupted in simultaneous, raucous celebration of the much-anticipated announcement. “To some extent this outburst of euphoria surpassed 1994,” the year of the first democratic elections in South Africa, writes Ahmed Kathrada, a former political prisoner incarcerated with Mandela for twenty-six years. “The scenes of jubilation, the spontaneous outpouring of celebration following FIFA’s decision, the solidarity of pride and unity evoked by a sporting event should serve as a shining example to black and white alike.”<sup>1</sup> Winnie Madikizela-Mandela later explained South Africa’s intention to use the planet’s preeminent sporting event as political theater: “The 2010 World Cup is about nation-building, putting us on the global map and making us a nation to be reckoned with. The event is going to make us proud. We are going to show the world wonders come 2010.”<sup>2</sup> How did an African country come to host the World Cup?

This book tries to answer this question by telling the little-known story of football in Africa and how the continent changed the world’s game. Played almost everywhere, in the center of huge modern cities and in isolated rural villages, football (or soccer) is the most popular sport in Africa and possibly the most popular cultural activity on our planet.<sup>3</sup> According to a survey conducted in 2006 on behalf of FIFA, the game’s governing body, 46 million of the world’s 265 million registered players—more than one in six—are African.<sup>4</sup> This simple, fun, and accessible game captures the attention of ordinary Africans, men and women, children and adults, workers and students, political leaders and apolitical masses, the business elite and the unemployed. Not many other African social practices are so tightly bound up with local, national, continental, and global dynamics.

*African Soccerescapes* is one of the first academic studies to connect Africans’ intense passion for the game to their experiences with European

domination; the growth of cities and towns; the struggle for independence and nationhood; migration; and globalization.<sup>5</sup> Drawing primarily on published sources in English and French, the book looks at the ways in which Africans appropriated football from European colonizers and transformed it into a professional industry shaped by transnational capital and mass media. Firmly situating teams, players, and associations in the international framework in which Africans have to compete, I focus on how the game influenced, and was influenced by, racial, ethnic, and national identities, cultural values, economic interests, and power struggles. Selected case studies from around the continent highlight differences and similarities and bring out connections between sport and society. My central argument is that African players, coaches, officials, and fans have written crucial chapters in the history of football and therefore any interpretation of the game's global past must address the interaction of African practitioners and fans with this exciting and nearly universal expression of human culture.

The book is divided into six narrative chapters arranged thematically and chronologically. Chapter 1 opens with the arrival of football with European imperial expansion in the late nineteenth century and traces the game's spread beyond port cities by means of railroads, colonial military forces, and mission schools. Chapter 2 examines how Africans from Algeria to Zululand wrested control of football from the hands of the colonizers during the interwar period, turning it into a distinctively African activity featuring magicians and healers, innovative playing styles, and an indigenous fan culture. The three case studies presented in chapter 3 demonstrate how football contests and organizations fueled Africa's broader quest for political and cultural liberation in the mid- and late twentieth century and helped to construct a sense of nationhood among diverse populations.

Chapter 4 begins with an examination of the ways in which stadiums and national leagues bolstered a sense of nationhood after independence. It then goes on to probe how the *Confédération Africaine de Football* (CAF) fostered pan-African solidarity and democratized world football through antiapartheid activities and its campaign to expand the number of African teams in the World Cup finals. Chapter 5 looks into the causes and consequences of African player migration overseas—a historical process that has disproportionately rewarded Europe at Africa's expense. Chapter 6 analyzes the increasingly commercialized and globalized African football of the 1990s and 2000s, as seen in privatized clubs and competitions, as well

as in the launch of youth football academies and the growth of the women's game. The book's epilogue is devoted to the run-up to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. A discussion of the significance of this sporting megaevent illustrates how race and racism, nationhood, and capitalism continue to play an important role in African football today.

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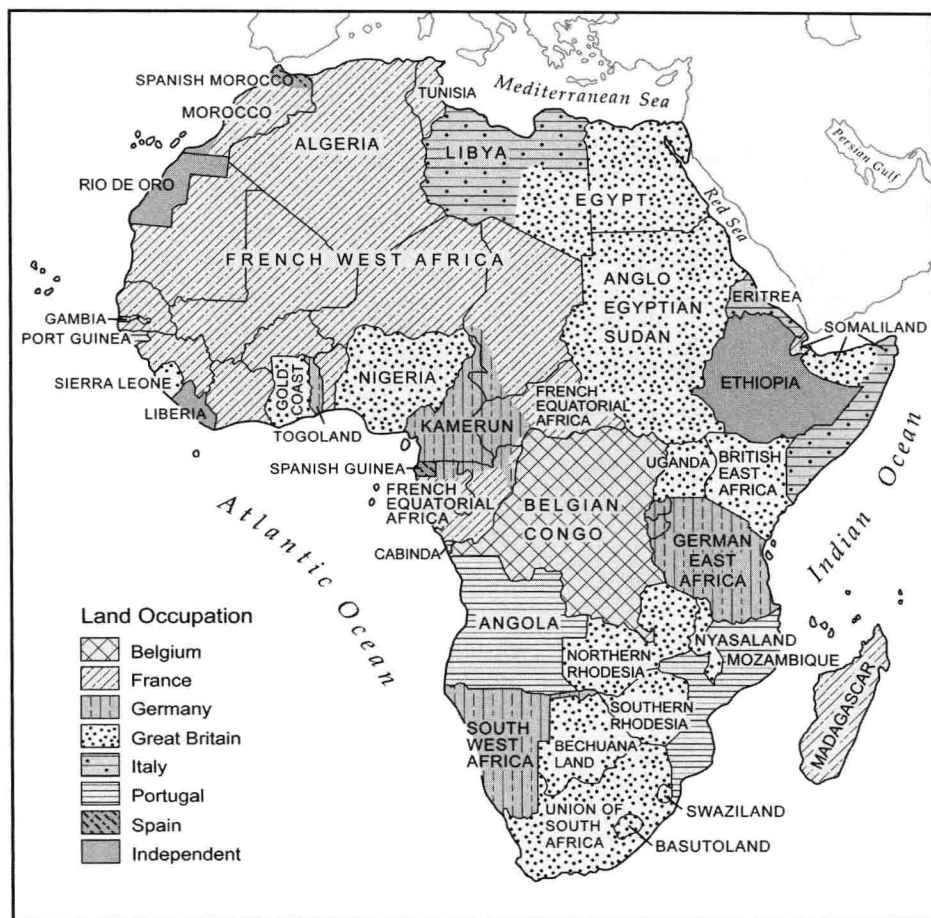
I must first thank David Robinson and Joseph C. Miller, editors of the Africa in World History series at Ohio University Press, for giving me the opportunity to write *African Soccerscapes*. The final manuscript was vastly improved by detailed and constructive comments of two anonymous reviewers. Gill Berchowitz, Nancy Basmajian, and the production staff at Ohio University Press deserve special recognition for their professionalism and enthusiasm in bringing this book to fruition.

Generous funding from the Department of History, the Center for Integrative Studies in the Arts and Humanities, and the Internal Research Grant Program at Michigan State University enabled me to complete this project ahead of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. I am massively indebted to Peter Limb for discovering an incredible number of sources on African football and building a superlative library collection on the topic. History chairperson Mark Kornbluh gave me release time and, with David Bailey, taught me the art of writing effective grant proposals. Leslie Hadfield and Jill Kelly were indefatigable research assistants, and many colleagues in the Department of History and the African Studies Center gave their friendship and backing, including Nwando Achebe, Ibro Chekaraou, Pero Dagbovie, Laura Fair, Walter Hawthorne, Deo Ngonyani, James Pritchett, and David Wiley.

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MAP 1 Colonial Africa, 1914. Map by Claudia K. Walters. Source: <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/images/colonialism1914.jpg>.



MAP 2 Contemporary Africa and major cities. *Map by Claudia K. Walters. Source: <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/images/capitals.jpg>.*

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## **“The White Man’s Burden”**

*Football and Empire, 1860s–1919*

MODERN SPORTS start with European imperial expansion in the last two centuries. The agents of that imperialism played sports among themselves, but also saw sport as a tool of civilization. For example, British soldiers, sailors, traders, and government employees enjoyed football for their own entertainment, but they also saw it as pivotal in the European “civilizing mission” in Africa. Building on their experiences with youth and urban workers in industrial Britain, teachers and missionaries used this inexpensive, easy-to-learn fun to satisfy “the white man’s burden.” This expression, taken from Rudyard Kipling’s famous formulation, meant teaching African converts and colonial subjects about the virtues of Christianity, capitalist commerce, and Western civilization. In this opening chapter, I intend to show how the game of football arrived in Africa in the late nineteenth century through the major port cities and then began to spread into the interior by the 1920s by means of newly laid railway lines, Western-style schools run mainly by missionaries, and the colonial armed forces.

Africans, of course, had their own sports, but these activities were little esteemed by their new imperial masters. Sports such as wrestling, martial arts, footraces, canoe racing, and competitive dancing offer compelling evidence of how agrarian African societies embraced *Sportgeist*—the spirit of sport.<sup>1</sup> As the historians William Baker and Tony Mangan explain: “Throughout pre-colonial Africa . . . dances and games were long performed with a seriousness akin to sport in modern industrial societies, and for purposes not altogether different: the striving for status, the assertion of identity, the

maintenance of power in one form or another, and the indoctrination of youth into the culture of their elders.”<sup>2</sup> Indigenous sports were spectacles of fitness and physical prowess, technical and tactical expertise. Major competitions were community festivals with their rituals of spectatorship, including oral literary performances of bards (griots) and praise singers in honor of the athletes. Clearly, precolonial athletic traditions had much in common with Western sport. As such, they provided the “soil into which the seeds of [European] sport would be later planted.”<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, the first recorded football matches come from South Africa, where Europeans began settling nearly four centuries ago. The games involved whites in the Cape and Natal colonies. The record of this European sport seems to begin in 1862, when games between teams of soldiers and civil servants, between “home-born” (i.e., British) and “colonial-born” (i.e., South African) whites, were played at Donkin Reserve in Port Elizabeth and on the Green Point racecourse in Cape Town.<sup>4</sup> In 1866, “city” and “garrison” sides played in the Market Square in Pietermaritzburg, the capital of Natal colony. These early rough-and-tumble games featured elements of both rugby and soccer, which was not unusual because different forms of the game existed before the rules of association football were codified on October 26, 1863, in London. Devotees of the kicking game were soon referred to as “soccers” (an abbreviation of “assoc”), as opposed to “ruggers,” who played the handling game of rugby, the rules of which were devised in 1871.<sup>5</sup>

The influx of working-class British soldiers into southern Africa during colonial military campaigns against the Zulu state and the Afrikaners (mainly descendants of the Dutch and also known as Boers) inspired the founding of the first official football organizations in Africa. Pietermaritzburg County Football Club and Natal Wasps FC were formed around 1880 and the Natal Football Association in 1882. The whites-only South African Football Association (SAFA), founded in 1892, was the first national governing body on the continent. SAFA became the first member of FIFA on the continent in 1910.<sup>6</sup> Despite its colonial origins, soccer in South Africa by the 1920s would be increasingly perceived as a blue-collar, black sport, while rugby, cricket, and other middle-class sports such as tennis and golf became intimately linked to white power and identities.

### Looking around the Continent

In other parts of the continent, football’s early history was also connected to expatriate European colonizers. Between 1894 and 1897, for example,



FIGURE 1 “Dakar—a Football Match,” c. 1919 (*Alegi collection*)

French settlers in Oran (Algeria) channeled their sporting passion into the formal creation of a football club.<sup>7</sup> In Tunis there was enough interest in the game by 1906 to warrant the formation of Racing Club. The following year in Cairo saw the formation of Al Ahly, which initially included some Europeans but would become an all-Egyptian club in 1924—and a venue for anticolonial protest, as we will see. By 1913, French and other Europeans were playing regular matches in Dakar and Brazzaville, the capitals of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

The game was on an even firmer footing in the Belgian Congo, where a whites-only Ligue de Football du Katanga began in May 1911 in the copper-mining town of Élisabethville (today Lubumbashi).<sup>9</sup> Since only four teams competed in the 1925 B. Smith Cup—the Katanga championship—white football was limited in scope. In Léopoldville (Kinshasa), the capital, matches were taking place around 1912. By 1919–20, a formal association existed that later assumed the name Fédération de Football Association du Pool and affiliated with the Belgian football association in 1927. Much like colonists in other parts of Africa, the French, Flemish, Portuguese, and British in the Congo organized teams along the lines of European nationality. In the 1920s, a new championship against Brazzaville teams energized local football, which by this time had started to attract small sponsorships from private firms.