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Journal of Sport and Social Issues 2007 31: 143

DOI: 10.1177/0193723507300481

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Football Academies and the Migration of African Football Labor to Europe

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This article analyzes one of the key features of the increased trading in African football labor since the 1990s, the establishment of football “academies” in Africa. The article begins by setting out a broad explanatory framework that articulates the transit of African footballers to Europe and the role of football academies in this process as a form of neo-colonial exploitation and impoverishment of the developing world by the developed world. A brief account of the history, geography, economics, and consequences of African football talent migration to Europe follows. The main focus of the article is the construction of a typology of football academies in Africa and an analysis of their role in the export of African football labor. The article concludes by analyzing the key challenges that the growth of football academies has posed for the African game and outlines ways that these challenges might be addressed.

Keywords: *football academies; Africa; migration; exploitation; neocolonial*

The dramatic increase in the migration of African footballers to Europe in the last 10 years has given rise to a growing popular discourse that has invariably explained this process in terms of neocolonial exploitation. For example, in December 2003, Sepp Blatter, president of football’s world governing body, the *fédération internationale de football association* (FIFA), argued that those European clubs who had benefited most from the trade in African players had conducted themselves as “neocolonialists who don’t give a damn about heritage and culture, but engage in social and economic rape by robbing the developing world of its best players” and described their recruitment of young Africans as “unhealthy if not despicable” (cited in Bradley, 2003). Although the key academic studies of African player migration to Europe have relied much less on hyperbole in their critique, they have shared the broader thrust of Blatter’s sentiments (Bale, 2004; Darby, 2000, 2002, 2006; Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001; Poli, 2002, 2006). This body of work argues broadly that the recruitment of African

playing talent by European football clubs can be interpreted as a form of neocolonial exploitation in that it involves the sourcing, refinement, and export of raw materials, in this case African football talent, for consumption and wealth generation in the European *core* and that this process results in the impoverishment of the African *periphery*.

Beyond drawing analogies between neocolonialism and football labor migration, elements of this emerging literature have specifically explored the utility of economic explanations of globalization, particularly the dependency paradigm and world systems theory as a framework for interpreting Africa's football drain (Darby, 1997, 2000, 2002, 2006). Indeed, these approaches have been used elsewhere as tools for analyzing the dynamics of sports labor migration (Arbena, 1994; Bale & Sang, 1996; Bale & Maguire, 1994; Klein, 1991; Magee & Sugden, 2002; Maguire, 2004; McGovern, 2002). The work of the economist Andre Gunder Frank (1969), more specifically his theory of dependent underdevelopment, has proved particularly useful in helping conceptualize the transit of African players to Europe. The central thread of Frank's general thesis is that core, industrialized Western nations dominate the global capitalist system largely by dictating the terms upon which world trade is conducted. As a consequence, they develop and prosper through the underdevelopment of those on the periphery of the global economy. In many ways this encapsulates the nature of European clubs' appropriation of football talent from Africa. These clubs are clearly financially stronger than their African counterparts and they use their powerful economic position to dictate the terms on which the trade in football labor is conducted. Because of the precarious financial situation of the game in Africa's primary talent-exporting regions, a theme that will be explored in more detail shortly, clubs here find themselves in a position of dependent trading, and this facilitates the deskilling and underdevelopment of African football on terms and conditions set by European interests.

This article builds on the emerging body of work on the exodus of Africa's elite football talent to Europe by analyzing one of the key features of the increased trading in African players since the 1990s, the establishment of football "academies" in Africa. Particular emphasis is placed on constructing a typology of these academies and assessing the extent of their role in facilitating the export of Africa's football talent. Although the authors recognize the sociological limitations involved in the construction and use of typologies, it is felt that the typology presented here represents, to borrow Maguire's (2004, p. 480) phrase, "a symptom of a beginning" that will help to situate more empirically based work by the authors in the future. The data used to construct the typologies presented here is largely secondary, although two periods of ethnographic field work at football academies in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and Sol Béni, Cote D'Ivoire, in August 2003 and December 2005 respectively add empirical detail. Before turning to the development of football academies as conduits for the migration of African footballers to Europe it is important to begin with a broad context-setting discussion.

Colonial Resource to Neocolonial Commodity: History, Geography, Economics, and Impact of African Player Migration to Europe.

The recruitment of African players by professional European clubs extends back to the colonial era. It should come as no surprise that the football clubs of those countries that had a significant imperial presence in Africa were the main beneficiaries of African migrant talent. This was particularly the case in France (Darby, 2000; Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001; Murray, 1995) and Portugal (Darby, 2006), both of whose domestic leagues and international teams drew on African-born players. The collapse of colonial rule in Africa did little to restrict this process and by the 1970s there was a steady flow of African football talent to France and Belgium (Broere & van der Drift, 1997). By the early 1980s African players began crossing European borders in even greater numbers. This trend accelerated significantly in the 1990s and by the midpoint of the decade there were an estimated 350 Africans playing first or second division football in Europe. By the start of the new millennium this figure had increased by over 100 percent (Ricci, 2000) and has continued to rise since then (Ward & Darby, 2006).

In terms of the patterns that underpin the flow of African players to Europe, colonial and neocolonial linkages are clearly apparent. As outlined earlier, up until the early 1960s a number of European colonial powers benefited greatly from football talent from their African colonies. From the 1960s colonial history has continued to be influential in determining the direction and pattern of migratory flows between African and European football, with France, Belgium, Portugal, and England ranking among the primary destinations of African migrant footballers (Darby, 2000). Running parallel to this neocolonial pattern of migration has been a much more diffuse and seemingly random movement of African players to a range of leagues throughout Europe and beyond. For example, at the African Cup of Nations in 2002 the 16 qualifying teams included players from 26 non-African leagues (Boniface, 2001). This highlights the fact that the range of countries over which African players are distributed includes many that did not have colonial links with the continent. Thus, colonial and neocolonial linkages offer only a partial explanation of a complex process that has not only accelerated exponentially since the early 1990s but has also taken on features not previously seen in the history of Africa's football exodus. A fuller explanation of football migration patterns between Europe and Africa must therefore also take into account a range of factors specific to the political economy of world football.

The growing profile and status of African national teams in the international arena since the mid-1980s has undoubtedly been one of the most significant factors in the increasingly rapid flow of Africans to the European game. This development was closely linked to the election of the Brazilian João Havelange as the world body's president in 1974 and his subsequent efforts in developing the game in those regions that had been, until that point, largely overlooked by FIFA (Darby, 2002). A by-product of

this was an increased presence and improved results for African sides at the World Cup Finals (Darby, 2005a) as well as excellent performances by African teams at the world under-20 and under-17 youth championships, introduced by Havelange's FIFA in 1977 and 1985 respectively. These developments effectively showcased the potential of emerging African talent to European clubs and helped generate the "demand" for African players in Europe (Darby, 2000).

The specific conditions that gave rise to the "supply" side of this migratory equation are undoubtedly rooted in the fragile political economy of African football vis-à-vis the economic strength of the European club game. Largely on the back of the revenue generated by the UEFA Champions League and the sale of media rights, clubs in Europe's top-level leagues, particularly in England, Germany, Spain, Italy, and France, have been in a position to offer the type of salaries that simply do not exist elsewhere in the football world, and least of all in Africa (King, 2003; Poli, 2006). This explains the attraction of European football, but what is it about the African game that made, and continues to make, the "lure" of Europe so irresistible for African players? The answer to this question can be found in an understanding of the economics and administrative culture of football in Africa's two primary player-exporting "zones," North Africa and those coastal nations in the sub-Saharan west of the continent.

In parts of North Africa, particularly Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt, there are pockets of professionalism that can encourage players to remain at home, at least in the early part of their careers. Some clubs, such as Al Ahly in Egypt and Esperance in Tunisia, have slowly built up professional foundations while others, such as Arab Contractors in Egypt, have relied on investment from the corporate sector that has allowed them to not only hold on to their most talented players for longer but also buy and retain players from other African countries (Guedset, 2002). Despite these varying levels of professionalism in North Africa, clubs are still not able to compete with European teams, even those playing outside the elite level, in terms of the salaries they can offer to players. For example, Tshimanga (2001) has highlighted the fact that the annual operating budgets of the two Moroccan clubs Raja Casablanca and Widal, generally recognised as being among the wealthiest clubs on the continent, represent only one third of that of some of the smallest teams in the French first division. In keeping with this analysis De Brie (2001) has suggested that the wage gap between professional clubs in North Africa and their counterparts in France can be as large as 20 to 1. These stark statistics represent one of the key reasons for the migration of significant numbers of North Africans to professional leagues in Europe and beyond. However, these financial disparities and the "push" factor that they generate are magnified in the coastal nations of the sub-Saharan west of Africa where the precarious socioeconomic and political climate has wreaked havoc on domestic football infrastructures. This has effectively negated any potential for setting up the well-organized professional clubs and leagues that might afford African players the regular, guaranteed salaries and labor protection found in Europe (Darby, 2002, 2005b).

All of this highlights the stark choice that young African footballers with aspirations to make a career from the game are confronted with. There is little in the way of infrastructure, professionalism, or the possibility of a good salary to encourage them to remain in their home nations and eschew the potential of earning the almost unimaginable riches, by African standards at least, that the European game offers. Add into this equation the malaise and endemic corruption found in football administration in sub-Saharan Africa (Darby 2002; Mahjoub, 1992; Sugden & Tomlinson, 1998) and it becomes clear that it is difficult, if not impossible, to be critical of the majority of Africa's most talented players for choosing where their best career options lie and for seeking to achieve their ambitions. However, the system of recruitment that facilitates African player migration, and the consequences of this process for African football and the many players who are unsuccessful in their quest for a contract with a European club, have been the subject of scathing criticism from football administrators, sections of the liberal European media, and human rights activists, and it is to an overview of this critique that the article now turns.

African football administrators and government officials have long been critical of the export of African football labor to Europe and have made a number of efforts to regulate this process (Darby, 2000). As the overview of migratory trends outlined earlier reveals, attempts at regulation have proved unsuccessful in preventing players and clubs from accepting offers of contracts or trials from European clubs and talent speculators. The inception of the African Champions League in 1997 by Issa Hayatou, president of the Confédération Africaine de Football (CAF), did go some way toward creating the economic incentives necessary to encourage players to remain with some African clubs (Alhstrom, 1997; Fahmy, 1997). However, this applied only to a handful of clubs that qualified for the competition and at best it served merely to delay the migration of African players to more lucrative leagues. The increasing use and abuse of young African talent during the 1990s by unscrupulous agents and speculators, who recognized in the trade in African talent an opportunity for personal financial gain, also began to cause serious concerns within Europe (Broere & van der Drift, 1997; Darby, 2000; Krushelnycky, 1999). For example, when the Italian club Torino signed three Ghanaians from an Italian recruiting agency following Ghana's gold medal in the 1991 Under-17 World Youth Championship, Antonio Mataresse, then president of the Italian Football Federation, forcefully argued that "It would be a shame for Italy to give away kids to speculators. We must not plunder in Africa" (cited in Mahjoub, 1997b, p. 133).

Beyond those players who were successful in procuring contracts, albeit often highly exploitative ones (Broere & van der Drift, 1997), with European clubs there was another strata of migrant linked to the trade in African players that was causing concern not only within the confines of the governance of the game but also among human rights activists with a particular interest in child trafficking. For example, Paul Carlier, founder of a pressure group called Sport and Freedom in the early 1990s, began campaigning on behalf of young African players who had been brought to

Belgium by clubs and agents for trials and simply abandoned if unsuccessful. This group highlighted the fact that many of those who were not successful in securing contracts were not returned home by those who had organized the trials and were left as illegal immigrants on the streets of Belgium. In some cases these migrants turned to child prostitution as their only means of survival (Donnelly & Petherick, 2004; Krushelnycky, 1999). Although the situation in Belgium improved with the passing of legislation in 1999 that prevented the more sinister features of the influx of African football talent to the country's clubs, what effectively constituted child exploitation continued to characterize aspects of the European trade in African players. The depth of the concern over this was perhaps best exemplified by the fact that the United Nations Commission on Human Rights called for an investigation into the problems of young African players being effectively bought by agents and then taken to Northern European countries to be offered to clubs. The UN report, published in 1999, concluded by making reference to the "danger of effectively creating a modern-day 'slave trade' in young African footballers" (cited in Bale, 2004, p. 240).

Although Carlier's pressure group had been successful in introducing a degree of regulation in the export of African players to Belgium and the UN report had raised the profile of the nefarious features of this process, the intervention of Sepp Blatter in the debate in the late 1990s was crucial. His criticism of the loss of Africa's football resources to Europe went beyond the rhetorical and he became the key driver in a set of transfer regulations, introduced in September 2001, that effectively prevented clubs from signing players under the age of 18. In addition, these regulations made provision for clubs involved in the training and education of players between the ages of 12 and 23 to receive compensation from the buying club (FIFA, 2002). This tighter regulation has had the effect of ensuring that European clubs cannot legally poach African players under the age of 18 and has provided African clubs with more compensation than they have received in the past; and this has curbed the most exploitative practices of talent speculators. However, this is not to say that minors no longer feature in the continued trade in African footballers. Indeed, a new system of recruiting young talent through football academies in Africa has been gathering pace since the early 1990s that both CAF and FIFA fear may allow European clubs to effectively circumvent the new transfer regulations and continue to procure the services of young African players.

Typology of Football Academies in Africa

Football academies, defined in the broadest terms as facilities or coaching programs designed to produce football talent, have long been a feature of the landscape of African football. For example, a number of the more prominent Portuguese clubs, such as Sporting Lisbon, Benfica, and Porto, invested in training facilities and coaching provision in Mozambique and Angola during the late colonial era with the

specific purpose of sourcing and nurturing talented players for Portuguese league football (Darby, 2006). Since the early 1990s though the number of academies has mushroomed. Although some have viewed this development as representing an opportunity for organised and concerted grassroots development for the African game, others have been more cynical about the primary objectives of these facilities (Maradas, 2001). Before engaging in a critique of football academies and commenting on their impact on the African game, it is important to account for and describe the different types that exist in the continent.

Football academies in Africa can be classified into four categories. The first are African academies, organized and run by African club sides or African national federations, which operate, on the surface at least, in a manner similar to those that exist in, for example, Europe. The second are Afro-European academies, which involve either a partnership between an existing academy and a European club or an arrangement whereby a European club takes a controlling interest in an African club and then either subsumes the club's existing youth structures or establishes new ones. The third can be classified as private or corporate-sponsored academies, which have well-established foundations and operate with the support and sponsorship of private individuals, usually former high-profile African players, national football federations, or the corporate sector. The final type are the nonaffiliated, improvised academies, which are set up on an ad hoc basis and involve poorly qualified staff and lack proper facilities. It is important to recognize that this typology is fluid in the sense that some academies have, at various stages of their existence, belonged to one or more of the categories outlined above. Furthermore, particular types of academies are not specific to particular countries, and in those nations that have been major exporters of football talent to Europe, examples of each type of academy can be found.

In the first category, the academy of the Cote d'Ivoire club, ASEC (Association Sportive des Employés de Commerce) Mimosas, is the most well known and successful in Africa. The MimoSifcom academy, based in Sol Béni in M'poutu, a small village close to Abidjan, was founded in 1994 by the Frenchman Jean-Guillou and the president of ASEC, Roger Ouégnin, and was one of the first structured football academies in sub-Saharan Africa. This academy shares a similar philosophy with that of typical youth football academies found throughout Europe in that it provides young players between the ages of 13 and 17 with both a football and an academic education. ASEC's academy has proved to be very successful in providing a steady stream of talent for the club's senior team as evidenced by the fact that it won the national championship in 1999 with players drawn largely from MimoSifcom. In the same year ASEC lifted the intercontinental CAF Super Cup with a team composed entirely of the first graduates of the academy. Although the "academicians," as they are commonly called in Abidjan, feed into the ASEC senior team, the most talented players are sold on, predominantly to European teams, as a way of recouping the costs incurred in the training and education of young players (Marsaud, 2001). Indeed, the sale of players such as Kolo Toure to Arsenal, Aruna Dindane to Anderlecht, Didier Zokora to

St. Etienne, and Salomon Kalou to Feyenoord has been crucial for the economic sustainability of the academy.

Other African club or federation academies exist on the continent, most notably in Ghana. The presence of sound infrastructures for the training of young players here is hardly surprising given Ghana's successes at the world youth level.¹ Coordinated youth development has been a feature of the Ghanaian football landscape as early as the 1960s when the country's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, recognizing the mobilizing potential of football (Darby, 2002), launched the Academicals, a national football development squad drawn from the most talented secondary school children (Quansah, 2001). The status of secondary school football and of the Academicals as the primary source of talented footballers declined in the 1970s, and they were replaced by locally based informal "Colts" leagues established throughout the country. Within these structures talented young players typically progressed from neighborhood club teams into the under-17 Colts league where they earned a small salary of around \$30 per month and played in a much more organized and competitive environment (Kirwin, 2004). A further layer of youth development was added in the aftermath of Ghana's success at international youth level in the early 1990s with the establishment of programs or camps run by the Ghanaian Football Association (GFA) that were serviced by the Colts leagues and involved players at the under-14 and under-17 levels undergoing intensive training with a view to eventually representing Ghana's junior international or senior teams. Some of the country's top teams have also recognized the benefits of setting up youth academies, and Hearts of Oak in particular has benefited from this approach. Indeed, the success of their academy in producing quality graduates has been instrumental in the club's tradition of success at the continental level. These infrastructures for youth development and their subsequent success in producing highly skilled young players in the early 1990s clearly account for the fact that by the turn of the new millennium Ghana was among the top three talent-exporting nations in Africa (Bale, 2004).² The other reason for Ghana's status as one of the primary football exporters in recent years has been the establishment of a number of Afro-European academies, and this takes us into a discussion of the second type of football academy in Africa.

Since the early 1990s football academies involving a partnership between an African facility and a European club have emerged to play a major role in the migration of African players to Europe. This partnership has typically taken two forms. In the first, European clubs set up academies or training centres or invest in existing ones and in return they have first claim on the best players that are produced. The Feyenoord Fetteh Football Academy is the most prominent in Ghana; it was launched in 1999 following an agreement between officials of the Dutch club, Feyenoord, the Ghanaian Sports Ministry, and local tribal chiefs in Fetteh. In identifying a site for a possible academy in Africa, Feyenoord adopted a classic neo-colonial industrial strategy by seeking a politically stable country where it could institute a facility that would provide a steady stream of raw talent. This was a point

made explicitly by Feyenoord's technical director on the club's website (Baan, 2003). The academy, based on the ASEC model, provides an academic as well as football education to talented Ghanaian players, but its key purpose is to source young talent for Feyenoord.

The other notable football academy in West Africa that falls into this category is the "Aldo Gentina" academy in Senegal. This academy was founded by the president of the Senegalese Football Federation, El Hadj Malick Sy, as a collaborative project between the Senegalese first division club Jeanne d'Arc and the French club AS Monaco. Initially the academy only recruited from the Jeanne d'Arc youth teams, but in 1993 it expanded its recruitment practices to incorporate players from throughout the country. Since then the academy has produced a steady stream of recruits not only for European clubs but also for Senegal's national youth and senior teams. For example, six graduates of this academy represented the Senegalese team that performed so capably at the 2002 World Cup (Ndiaye, 2001).

Alongside the European club-sponsored academy, there has been a second Afro-European arrangement that has facilitated the transit of young African talent in recent years. This involves European clubs purchasing controlling stakes in African clubs. The most prominent club to pursue this type of arrangement has been the Dutch club Ajax Amsterdam, which in 1999 acquired a 51 percent controlling stake in a Cape Town club, Cape Town Spurs, which was subsequently renamed Ajax Cape Town. This club currently plays in the South African Premier Soccer League and although it contributes to the local game there, the club's best players invariably find their way to Ajax or other European sides. Ajax followed up this arrangement by purchasing 51 percent of the Ghanaian club Obuasi Goldfields in the same year, but four years later it decided to sell its stock following poor returns on its 5.8 million Euros investment (ajax-usa.com, 2003).

Examples of the third type of academy, that is, those established and sponsored by former players, private individuals, or corporations, can also be found throughout West Africa and beyond. The Salif Keita Football Centre (SKFC) in Mali, established in 1993 by the former Malian international and African player of the year, has been particularly successful in preparing and educating young players for professional careers and international representation. Given that Mali does not have a professional league, it is hardly surprising that the best of the centre's graduates play their club football outside of the country.³ Indeed, a formal partnership with the French clubs Auxerre and Angers guaranteed a steady stream of SKFC graduates to France. However, Keita was, from the outset, eager to ensure that his centre operated as more than a facility for exporting talent. On his retirement from playing in 1985 Keita took up a position with the Malian Football Federation as national team technical director with a remit for developing structures for youth development. Frustrated at the lack of support he received in this position, he decided to establish his own academy, and since then he has remained committed to promoting Malian football at the domestic and international levels. This commitment has been evidenced through Keita turning the academy

into a football club and registering it for the national league in 1995 and by the fact that the Malian team that won a bronze medal at the under-20 World Youth Championships in Nigeria in 1999 contained a strong core of graduates from the academy (Traoré, 2001). Thus, players graduating from the SKFC not only migrate to richer leagues in Europe but also boost the profile of the local game and contribute to the Malian youth and senior international teams.

Other player-sponsored academies include those established by former Ghanaian international Abedi Pele and the current French international Patrick Viera in Senegal.⁴ The aims of these types of ventures range from being purely about producing quality players for the European market to boosting football development within Africa at both local and international levels. Some appear, on the surface at least, to be philanthropic, allowing those who have acquired financial security from the game to “give something back” to the communities that they grew up in. Viera himself identifies the key objective of the Diambars Institute as providing African youth with the opportunity to combine their football aspirations with a sound academic education. He summarizes the philosophy of the project and his rationale for setting it up in the following terms:

I wanted to go back and start a project there. I wanted to do something for the country and to use football—everyone loves football there—as a means to educate kids. . . . We tell them how hard it is to become a professional footballer. Perhaps only one or two will succeed. That’s why their education matters. (cited in Cowley, 2005, p. 20)

There are also a number of academies in West African countries that are sponsored by national or multinational companies. In the latter category, the Pepsi Football Academy in Lagos, Nigeria, is one of the largest and most prominent. Established in 1992, the academy currently trains around 4,000 students between the ages of 8 to 14. Although it has been successful in producing a long line of talented players for the national youth and senior teams, coaches, managers, and directors of foreign clubs have viewed the academy as a facility offering them well-trained and cheap recruits. The success of Nigeria’s neighbor Cameroon in recent editions of the World Cup and the Olympic football tournament has led to a vast increase in the number of football academies throughout that country. This development has occurred in an uncoordinated manner but has attracted interest and sponsorship from some national corporations. The Brasseries Academy, which operates with the backing of the national brewery, has been one of the most visible academies and has been successful in grooming players for the national team and European clubs.

Beyond those academies sponsored by former players or national or multinational corporations, there are others that are largely initiatives on the part of individuals who see the training, education, and export of African players as a business venture. In this category, Planète Champion Internationale, based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, is one of the most well known. This academy was set up as a joint venture between Philippe Ezri, a French businessman, and the country’s president, Blaise

Compoaré, in 1997. Planète Champion initially acquired \$250,000 of financial support from the French club Paris Saint-Germain, but when it pulled out of the arrangement Ezri and Compoaré continued to fund the project from their own pockets. Although Planète Champion claims to combine a football education with academic and vocational training, the focus is very much on nurturing the recruits' football abilities and selling them to the highest overseas bidder. As a result, the schooling that the students at the academy receive is often far from rigorous.⁵

The final type of football academy that exists in Africa consists of those that are not affiliated to a national association, club, or corporate organization and are established in an ad hoc, improvised manner by both African and European speculators whose primary interest is not football development but rather personal financial gain from the sale of young players to European clubs. These types of academies abound throughout the continent and can be found in the major cities of most West African countries. In Senegal, for example, there are as many as 160 training centers registered with the Association of Football School Managers of Senegal, founded in 1995. Faouzi Mahjoub argues that beyond these registered schools there are many more in Senegal and that it is impossible to determine with any accuracy the precise number of academies that exist in the country (Mahjoub, 2003). The extensive opportunities that these academies offer to talent speculators for recruiting young players cheaply have been augmented by the organization of tournaments for nonaffiliated academy teams, organized by the unofficial Confederation of African Football Academies (CAFA). At one tournament held in Lagos recently academy teams from the Republic of Benin, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Sudan, and Nigeria took part. Such initiatives are clearly oriented toward providing agents and speculators with an opportunity to assess a large pool of young talent at a single venue with a view to signing up players or organizing trials with European clubs. Given that the players in these types of academies are not affiliated with a club or federation, they fall outside any legal and administrative regulations that are aimed at safeguarding young players from unscrupulous agents (Centre pour l'égalité des chances et de la lutte contre le racisme, 2001). Thus, these players are not required to obtain an official letter from their national federation and neither are their agents required to pay a bond to take the players abroad for trial. All they require is a tourist visa for the player and an agreement to pay compensation to the parents should their son be successful. As a consequence, these private, nonaffiliated academies expose young Africans to the greed of noncertified agents who are able to acquire recruits cheaply and convince them to sign exploitative contracts if they are successful during their trials (Tshimanga, 2001).

Football Academies: Development Initiatives or Vehicles for Underdevelopment?

Given their diversity, it is difficult to generalize about the impact of football academies on African football or, indeed, African society. From the typology outlined

above, it is clear that some involve nefarious practices, exploit the poverty and aspirations of young Africans, and impoverish the local African game. Some, though, particularly those that fall within the first three categories of the typology outlined in this article, can be interpreted as contributing to the development of African football and local African economies. Those who put forward this hypothesis consist of academy managers and directors, European clubs who have developed links with these facilities, as well as some European-based Africans. They typically argue that these academies provide proper training facilities and a coordinated and systematic approach to youth player development and consequently improve the level and abilities of young African players. It is claimed that although the most talented products of the academy system are invariably exported to Europe, the standard of the local game throughout Africa improves on the back of the talent of those academy graduates who remain at home. The successes of ASEC's academy in its national championship and intercontinental competition are held up as the clearest example of this trend. It is also argued that academies contribute to the development of the international game in Africa, with youth and senior teams benefiting from the superior technical training that young prospects receive as part of their academy education. According to this hypothesis, national teams are further boosted when African players sign for European clubs and acquire "European" football traits. Indeed, it is somewhat of a truism in European football circles that African advances on the world stage have been largely contingent on the apparently more efficient, organized, and professional approach that the continent's players experience while playing in Europe.

Beyond the impact of academies on the development of African football, it is also possible to view the training that academies provide as the first stage in a process that contributes to broader development within African society. Those players who successfully graduate from African academies to European clubs earn salaries that are far in excess of average incomes in their county of origin. This benefits not only the individual players but also their extended families, with part of their salaries typically being sent home. This reinvestment of money earned in Europe often extends beyond family circles, and a number of returning migrant players have used part of their incomes in business, social, or football-specific projects. For example, as discussed earlier, Abedi Pele and Salif Keita have both made major financial contributions to football academies in their native countries. Pele also has a sportswear store in Accra while Keita owns a hotel in Bamako. In addition, George Weah, the former African, European, and World player of the year, famously invested his personal finances in the Liberian national team (Maradas, 1995), while Basil Boli, the Ivoirian-born former French international, is a leading figure with "les Namans," a nongovernmental organization in Cote d'Ivoire that provides support for former youth detainees, underprivileged children, and refugees. Among those who do not go on to play the game professionally, the academy experience may still prove beneficial, particularly in cases where the "students" emerge with academic or vocational training that they might otherwise not have received.

As noted earlier though, there is a considerable lobby, comprising leading figures within FIFA and CAF, human rights groups, and sections of the liberal European press, that views African player migration to Europe as a process that exploits aspiring African football talent and impoverishes the domestic and international game in the continent. This lobby contends that this occurs in four main ways. First, underdevelopment takes place on the domestic front by reducing standards of play and hence negatively affecting the possibility of developing the type of professional or semiprofessional leagues that might encourage local players to stay at home. Second, it has been argued that the difficulties that African national teams often have in procuring the services of their overseas players for the African Cup of Nations as well as World Cup and Olympic qualifying tournaments serve to undermine international performances rather than benefit them (Le Monde, 2002, January 17). Third, it has also been claimed by African players and administrators that those who play their football in Europe often become “de-Africanised” in terms of their style of play. For example, Jafet Noram, a former professional in France, recently suggested that the creativity and imagination of African players are lost through training in French academies and that they are “deculturised” in football terms (cited in Boniface, 2001). Finally, underdevelopment occurs at the level of the individual migrant player through being contracted to European clubs and agents in exploitative deals. Furthermore, for those who fail to make the grade in European football, their prospects are often bleak, and many feel unable or reluctant to return home and face the ignominy that they feel their failure will bring within their local communities. This process restricts not only their development as footballers but also their psychosocial development into adulthood.

Given the views of this lobby on African football labor migration to Europe in general, it is hardly surprising that it also contests the notion that academies in Africa contribute to football development. The primary concern surrounding the explosion in the number of academies in recent years is that these facilities are, in essence, nothing more than fronts for the systematic deskilling and exploitation of Africa’s football resources and that they will increasingly be used by European clubs and agents as a way of circumventing FIFA’s new transfer regulations. Indeed, it is difficult to counter Tataw’s suggestion that the vast majority of academies in the continent are “geared towards grooming and exporting youngsters to foreign clubs with the attendant results of leaving local clubs bereft of talent” (Tataw, 2001, p. 13). There is little question that European clubs that enter into partnerships with African academies or, as in the case of Ajax, buy controlling stakes in African clubs are essentially creating nurseries that allow them to reserve African talent until it can be legally transferred to Europe. This arrangement may be more favorable than the previous system of talented players being transferred to Europe at a very young age because it allows African youths to remain within their country of origin and family networks for longer and hence reduces the psychological and cultural problems associated with adjusting to foreign climes. However, the ultimate objective of these academies is to export African talent, thus strengthening European football at the expense of the African game.

Criticism of the impact of academies on the development of the game in Africa has emanated from the highest echelons of world football. For example, during a visit to Ghana in late January 2000, Sepp Blatter responded to the increased practice of European clubs brokering partnerships with African academies by imploring these clubs to “not just show up, take the best players, not let anyone have them and take them off to Europe” (Homewood, 2000). Issa Hayatou, the president of CAF, shared Blatter’s view, arguing that the growth in academies with European partners or investors:

... is a terrible thing, but once again, CAF cannot do anything. It is the responsibility of the national federations to come up with some kind of legislation to regulate this process. CAF cannot intervene in this matter, but we could advise them to avoid the exploitation of African talents to enrich the football of the countries above our continent. (cited in “Soccer Africa,” October 1999, p. 14)

Concerns have also been expressed about the fate of those graduates who fail to secure a professional contract on completion of their academy training, a group whose number far exceeds those who actually go on to earn a living from the game. Although many of the academies provide a general schooling and cater for the all-around development of the student, the majority concern themselves primarily with the provision of intensive football training. This emphasis on football, combined with the dreams of young African players of “making it” in Europe, often leads to a disregard for academic or vocational training, and when the vast majority leave the academy at 18 with their aspirations of a professional contract unfulfilled, their prospects are often bleak. This is a point encapsulated by Maradas:

For every Arune Dindane who makes the leap from ASEC to Anderlecht in the Belgian top division, there are thousands of others investing millions of hours of practice—time that could be spent on school work or learning another trade—without even reaching the first hurdle. Only a handful out of each year’s intake to the top schools will ever make a living from football. The rest are destined to be turned loose at 18 to fend for themselves. (Maradas, 2001, p. 8)

This problem is magnified when one considers those youths who sign up for the myriad of nonaffiliated, improvised academies throughout the continent. Few, if any, of these types of facilities concern themselves with preparing their students for a life outside of football, and for those who are deemed to have the potential to at least earn a trial with a European club, they are, as outlined earlier, more open to exploitation and mistreatment by unscrupulous academy managers and agents.

Conclusion

The establishment of football academies and schools of excellence in Africa by European clubs and their contribution to the loss of Africa’s football resources can

clearly be interpreted as an extension of broader neo-imperialist exploitation of the developing world by the developed world. European football concerns, be they clubs, scouts, or agents, have drawn on colonial and neocolonial links to source raw materials, in this case, players, which are refined in Africa through the academies or farm clubs for export and consumption on the European football market. In addition, this African “produce” is also often sold on at a hugely inflated value primarily for the benefit of European interests, thus further exacerbating the extent of the exploitation suffered by African football. This notion of African football migration and the role of academies in perpetuating it as a form of neocolonial exploitation is a view encapsulated by the current president of CAF, Issa Hayatou:

After the flight of brains Africa is confronted with the muscle exodus. The rich countries import the raw material—talent—and they often send to the continent their less valuable technicians. The inequality of the exchange terms is indisputable. It creates a situation of dependence . . . hence the pauperisation of some clubs and . . . the net decrease of the game quality and of the level of most of the national championships. Prestigious clubs are regularly deprived of their best elements and even the juniors cannot escape the recruiting agents, who profit from the venality of their leaders. (cited in CAF, 1998, p. 37.)

The explosion in the number of football academies established in Africa in the last 10 years and their role in the exodus of the continent’s most talented footballers to European leagues is one of the biggest challenges that African football faces. Although those academies in the first three categories of the typology outlined earlier in this article do make a contribution to youth player development and provide relatively good training facilities, the fact that the majority have as their fundamental aim the refining of African talent for export is hugely problematic. If this process is allowed to go unchecked, academy directors and managers, talent scouts, and European clubs will continue with their mass recruitment of young African players, the cream of whom will be sold on to the highest overseas bidders. This will lead to a grim future for the local game in Africa.

There is a great burden of responsibility on the part of African national federations and CAF to attempt to minimize the extent to which football academies operate as a mechanism for deskilling and impoverishing domestic football on the continent. Attempts have been made in a number of African countries to institutionalize academies and youth football structures. For example, in 1993 the Federation Ivoirienne de Football (FIF) introduced regulations governing the transfer of players from academies or youth clubs aimed at minimizing the extent to which this process weakened the domestic game (Poli, 2002).⁶ Ultimately, though, the best approach to limiting the talent drain is to work toward creating the financial incentives and development dynamic that might persuade the continent’s elite talent that their future, or at the very least, their formative years as players, lies in Africa. This is clearly fraught with difficulties, not least because any attempt to try to encourage financial investment from sponsors

or television is, of course, undermined by the talent exodus. African football administrators are also hamstrung by the fragile state of many African economies and it is clearly unrealistic, in the short term at least, to expect African club football to compete with the European game in terms of the monetary rewards it can offer players. Nonetheless, at the very least, the national federations must address the issues that have historically stunted the development of African football, such as poor administration, government interference, and corruption, before they can expect African playing talent to remain at home. FIFA must also play a role in monitoring and regulating the activities of academies in Africa. In recent years it has not been found wanting in the struggle to restrict Africa's football exodus, and its introduction of new transfer regulations and its continued financial assistance of the African game through the GOAL Project and the Financial Assistance Program have been crucial in this regard. Of course, if the trade in African players is to be properly regulated and the more exploitative aspects of the process challenged, then the cooperation of European clubs is crucial. However, in a context where European Leagues and clubs are increasingly experiencing financial pressures, it is highly likely that European football interests will continue with their proactive drive to seek out cheap recruits in Africa. Thus, it seems that for the foreseeable future, academies will remain part of the football landscape in Africa.

Notes

1. Ghana won the under-17 world youth championship in 1991 and 1995 and were runners-up at the 1993 under-20 World Cup.

2. By 2000 Ghana was exporting around 10 percent of all of those Africans playing their club football in Europe.

3. For example, the Mali team that played in the 2002 African Cup of Nations as hosts had only three players who had played in their national championship.

4. Pele's academy has been turned into a football club, Nania FC, which competes in local Ghanaian football. Viera's project is called the Diambars Academy.

5. Observations noted during a visit to Planète Champion in August 2003.

6. Under the legal framework governing academies and transfers introduced in 1993, the FIF did not allow the practice of academy youngsters being prohibited to play in domestic football in Cote d'Ivoire. This framework also required buying clubs to pay compensation to the academy for every year that the player spent there.

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