**National allegiance and sporting citizenship: Identity choices of ‘African’ footballers**

**Abstract**

Sport provides a useful lens through which the complexities of national identity and citizenship can be explored. Competitors don the national colours, salute the anthem and face the flag, becoming the embodiment of the wider imagined community, carrying the nation’s hopes and dreams. 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. A combination of national citizenship requirements, residency qualifications and the shifting regulations of sporting bodies has seen an increasing number of ‘transfers’ of national allegiance. In football, a number of African teams draw heavily on their European-born diasporas, a reflection of a colonial past and deeply entrenched migration routes. Alongside this, European national teams, most notably France and Belgium, are composed of many players with close family links to Africa. These scenarios serve to draw attention to the often complex, multi-layered and contingent nature of national identity.

**Introduction**

When France won the 2018 World Cup, defeating Croatia in the final in Moscow, it precipitated joyous scenes of flag-waving and associated public displays of national euphoria. The victory celebrations in Paris featured images of the players beamed onto the *Arc de Triomphe*. The images were accompanied by the names of the places in which each player grew up. While this firmly located the players in metropolitan France, their individual biographies reveal a much more complex and geographically diverse picture. The majority of players in the French winning squad have family connections to Africa with two of them born on the continent, while a further 12 have African parents. Another two players have family connections to the Caribbean. The French national team has long had a multi-cultural character and the 2018 version has strong echoes of the previous World Cup-winning team of 1998. There are a variety of ways in which this dimension of the team is viewed. For some on the political right the team is not regarded as being truly French while for some on the left, the World Cup win was portrayed as a victory for immigrants and for Africa. The nature of the French team and the biographies of its players highlight some of the ways through which sport is inextricably entwined with ideas of citizenship, nationality and migration, topics with a particular resonance in France where there are long-standing tensions over how the country accommodates its ethnic minorities. More specifically, they draw attention to the linkages between football in Europe and Africa and the routes through which they are increasingly connected. These issues form the subject matter of this paper with a focus on two key phenomena associated with international representation in men’s football; firstly, players with migrant backgrounds electing to play for the country in which they have been born and/or grew up and, secondly, players with similar backgrounds who choose to represent another country, often by virtue of family origins. These choices by players, facilitated by the regulations governing the practice of sporting citizenship, create potential tensions surrounding ideas of the nation.

**Context**

As football’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 globe have become entwined into the sport’s complex networks. Football enjoys considerable popularity throughout much of Africa, while professional players from the continent are increasingly embedded within a global labour market. South Africa’s hosting of the 2010 World Cup finals brought further attention to dimensions of the sport on the continent and, amongst other things, gave rise to a proliferation of popular books focusing on football there (e.g. Hawkey 2009; Bloomfield 2011). One outcome of the heightened attention focused on football in Africa is the migration of young footballing talent as players follow increasingly well-trodden migrant paths away from the continent. Most European leagues contain at least a sprinkling of African footballing talent. To an extent, such routes are facilitated by historical, linguistic and colonial connections as exemplified by the numbers of players making their way from north Africa to France for example. However, increasingly transnational scouting systems, complex webs of football agents, and the growth of footballing academies in African countries who act as conduits of talent to European clubs facilitate a more diverse pattern of movement to an ever widening set of destinations (Darby *et al* 2007; Darby 2011).

While many African players make their way to France and Spain, others are to be found plying their trade in the less fashionable leagues of Russia, Poland, Moldova and elsewhere. The lure of a professional career in Europe is understandable but, as with footballers from anywhere else, the numbers of those who make it to the highest levels is low. While many African players may exhibit a transnational career path, not everyone can emulate Ivory Coast’s Didier Drogba, Ghana’s Michael Essien or Egypt’s Mo Salah and for some the dream of fame, status and fortune ends in loneliness and alienation on the streets of European cities after failing to sufficiently impress an elite club. This raises serious concern and points towards the risks inherent in pursuing the dream of becoming a professional player (Poli 2010). The mobility of players also highlights the sometimes questionable processes through which agents operate and the ethical practices of some European clubs in endeavouring to harvest young talent at a very early age. In addition to its negative impact on players, the draining of young talent from the continent clearly has negative consequences for the development of footballing infrastructure in African countries, making it difficult for domestic leagues to develop as the best talent is drained away. This reinforces something of a core-periphery sporting relationship viewed by some as a form of latter-day imperialism draining Africa of a useful sporting resource (Murphy 2017; Hall 2018).

There is also another dimension to this loss of talent arising from the decisions of some players born in Africa, or of African parentage, to represent European countries in international competition. One of the world’s great players, Eusebio was indelibly associated with Portugal where he spent almost his entire playing career with Lisbon club Benfica and where he wore the colours of the Portuguese national team. Despite his high profile, it is sometimes overlooked that Eusebio was born and brought up in Mozambique, then a Portuguese colony. A long history of migration means that French teams of recent decades have featured many players of African origin. The 2018 version alluded to above is far from a new phenomenon. Indeed, the multi-ethnic background of France’s successful team of the late 1990s and early 2000s drew attention to issues of French identity via players such as Zinedine Zidane (born in France to Algerian parents), Patrick Vieira (born in Senegal but who moved to France as a child) and Marcel Desailly (born in Ghana but brought up in France). Although the team was hailed by many as a symbol of a multi-cultural nation, it drew the ire of the French far right with then *Fronte Nationale* leader Jean-Marie le Pen implying that many of the players were not really French (Dauncey and Hare 2000; Dubois 2010; Krasnoff 2017). This sense of the team not being sufficiently French lingers on in debates surrounding the 2018 success suggesting that, in some ways at least, little has changed in 20 years.

The second focus of this paper is on what might be seen as a reversal of the above process: the reclaiming of members of their diasporas by some African countries. Increasing flexibility governing international representation means that many European-born players avail themselves of the right to represent the country of their parents or grandparents in international competition. FIFA regulations, and those of other sporting bodies, are facilitating the amalgamation of both civic and ethnic senses of national identity whereby players may represent either country of birth or of family origin. Consequently, sportspeople competing for a country other than the one they were born or raised in has become a more common phenomenon. In football, current regulations effectively permit players to play for a country whose citizenship they are eligible for whether through birth, descent or residency. The rules also allow for switching allegiances as long as the player has not played a full competitive international for his original country. As Holmes and Storey (2011) suggest there is a range of motivations amongst players. For some there may be a clear affinity with their country of choice while for others their decision may be more pragmatic based around career enhancement. Seiberth *et al* (2017) found that young football players of Turkish origin growing up in Germany appeared to be making career-driven decisions on whether to represent Turkey or Germany. They argue that ethnic identity appeared to play only a minor role in the decisions of these players. In choosing which country to represent, sportspeople are making a very public statement of allegiance; but it would be misleading to assume that this necessarily reflects their feelings of identity. There needs to be a deeper consideration of the distinction between national identity and sporting citizenship.

The case of Pacific island rugby players casts some light on these issues. Kanemasu and Molnar (2013) suggest that when Fijian-born rugby players elect to play for other nations, this reflects a pragmatic choice in electing to play for the stronger one. However, in so doing they are also representing Fiji on a global stage. While some Fijians may bemoan the loss of talent due to structural inequalities in world rugby, such transnationalism acquires a symbolic importance and provides a form of both career development and social advancement (Horton 2012). Sporting migration and transnational identities are well-exemplified by the Vunipola brothers, Mako was born in New Zealand and Billy in Australia to a migrant Tongan rugby player whose career took him to Wales and England. The brothers now find themselves playing for England. Another rugby player, Manu Tuilagi, also plays for England although his five older brothers have all represented Samoa, their country of birth. Grainger *et al* (2014) discuss the apparent ‘capture’ of young Samoan-eligible players by New Zealand and the implications of this for both the players’ careers and for Samoan rugby. At heart, they argue, is a distinction between a more fluid and less geographically-bound sense of identity juxtaposed to the exclusivity associated with a ‘standard’ notion of citizenship. All of this suggests that the complex connections between place of birth, residency and ancestry need to be more fully taken into account rather than placing undue emphasis on a singular idea of citizenship. Some players may occupy an identity space that reflects the connections between two or more places and nations.

Some countries have utilised migratory and colonial connections to good advantage, pursuing instrumentalist policies that expand the pool of available players and it has become an increasingly common phenomenon for some smaller countries. Jamaica’s team in the 1998 football World Cup finals and that of Trinidad and Tobago in the finals of 2006 both included a number of second-generation players born in Britain. As the English-born Jamaican international Robbie Earle put it at the time, “many exiled Jamaicans are realising their dreams through the team, and that means a lot to us” (Earle and Davies 1999, 108). Subsequently, many Caribbean teams have utilised the regulations to select players born and raised in Britain and elsewhere drawing on the descendants of post-World War 2 migrants from the West Indies to the UK. For some players this provides an opportunity to play internationally that would otherwise not be available to them. For example, Nottingham-born Jaylee Hodgson is but one of many players whose career has mainly been spent in non-league football in England but who has played at international level, in his case for Montserrat (Montague 2014). At the time of writing, London-born Ronayne Marsh-Brown, who plays for non-league Whitehawk, had just received an international call-up from Guyana. His mother is from there and, at the age of 33, it clearly offers a belated entry to international football. Elsewhere, teams like Turkey and Croatia have displayed an increasing willingness to tap into their extensive overseas diasporas. This strategy has also been used pragmatically by the Republic of Ireland since the mid-1980s with a very clear policy of drawing on the Irish backgrounds of many players born and brought up in Britain (Holmes and Storey 2011).

A separate, though related, issue emerges when new countries come into being and attain international sporting status. The most obvious current example is the case of Kosovo where recognition of its status as an international team has led to attempts to ‘reclaim’ players who have previously played for other countries. Kosovan exiles have lined out for other international teams, most notably Albania to whom they are connected through ethnicity, and Switzerland where many were born or brought up as children of refugees. The 2016 European Championship match between Switzerland and Albania produced the strange phenomenon where roughly half of each country’s squad might have found themselves playing for the other team had they made different decisions on their international futures. Indeed, the Basel-born Xhaka brothers exemplified this with Taulent lining out for Albania and Granit for Switzerland. However, the Xhakas are not the first siblings to represent different countries. The Berlin-born Boateng half-brothers lined up against each other in both the 2010 and 2014 World Cup finals tournaments. Kevin Prince Boateng plays for Ghana (from whence their father hails) and Jerome represents Germany where their respective mothers were born. In a similar manner, the brothers of Manchester United’s French World Cup-winning star Paul Pogba – Florentin and Mathias – both play for Guinea, their parent’s home country. The older brothers were born there, though Paul was born in France after the family migrated. This complexity is further exemplified in cases such as that of the goalkeeping Mandanda brothers. Steve, the oldest brother, is a regular member of the French squad but his younger brother Parfait has represented DR Congo at full international level and another, Riffi, has played at under-age level for DR Congo. Ironically Steve was born in Kinshasa, in what was then known as Zaire, shortly before the family moved to France where, subsequently, his younger brothers were born. So, a player born in what is now DR Congo plays for France, while his French-born brothers don the Congolese colours. Former Cameroon goalkeeper Jacques Songo’o spent most of his professional career in France and Spain. His two sons Franck (born in Cameroon) and Yann (born in France) have both played representative football for both countries.

This switching of nationalities has been condemned by some as undermining the values and symbolic importance of sport and weakening the bonds between the players and the nation. It is also seen by some as ethically questionable in allowing instrumentalist and commercial values to undermine sporting virtues with calls for eligibility to be based around feelings of cultural affinity and belonging rather than more liberal ideas of citizenship (Iorwerth *et al* 2012). For some, it is seen as an attempt to garner national sporting success by outsourcing through naturalising athletes and the granting of forms of sporting citizenship has raised serious concerns (Phan 2013). The reaction of fans is varied with some supporters comfortable with the idea of players from emigrant backgrounds, for others there is a solidly pragmatic view in that it widens the pool of players, while others are concerned over the supposed dilution of the team’s identity. The Swiss national team in recent decades has been characterised by an increasing cosmopolitanism based on players of Turkish and African origin and, more recently, players with Balkan refugee backgrounds. Hess (2014) has explored how issues of immigration and integration have played out in relation to the multi-ethnic nature of the Swiss team and where questions have been raised about the extent of its ‘Swiss-ness’. The agency displayed by players, facilitated by the sport’s regulatory structures, runs counter to more conservative ideas of the nation.

Negative reactions are reinforced through specific controversies. In 2000 the Welsh rugby team became embroiled in the so-called ‘grannygate’ affair when they selected New Zealand-born players who it transpired were not qualified to play for them. In 2004 Qatar attempted to select a number of Brazilian football players by granting them citizenship although they did not live in the country and had no family connection to it. From the Qatari perspective this was seen as a device to enhance their prospects of success, while for the players there was the chance of financial reward and gaining international career recognition. From a FIFA perspective this development was seen to be against the spirit of their regulations and it prompted the introduction of emergency measures to prevent players assuming a new nationality where there was no clear connection to the country concerned. FIFA acknowledged that there was nothing illegal in this, but argued it was against the spirit and integrity of the regulations. More recently, Qatar’s automatic qualification for the 2022 World Cup as hosts has led to attempts to strengthen the team through the naturalisation of players from other countries, some in Africa (a policy also pursued by Qatar in other sports). Recently, this path was also taken by Equatorial Guinea who, as well as using a number of Spanish-born players of Equatorial Guinean descent, have granted nationality to a number of Brazilian-born players (and others) allowing them to represent the country in recent years. While this is the most blatant example of this trend (and has provoked a critical reaction in many quarters), there is increasing evidence of the naturalising of players to allow them to play for a particular country. Similar trends are apparent in athletics where a growing number of African athletes compete for European countries (Adjaye 2010). However, in many instances, and notwithstanding the Qatari and Equatorial Guinean examples above, ethnicity remains a key factor and, while for some the increasing elasticity of sporting citizenship is seen as pragmatic, for others it is viewed as a reflection of the complexity of identity.

Two further points are worth bearing in mind. What Jansen and Engberson (2017) refer to as nationality swapping has been a long-standing sporting phenomenon. Their study of Olympic competitors suggests that, although there has been a recent growth in this, it needs to be seen in relation to wider structural issues associated with the regulations governing citizenship. While Poli (2007) has talked of the de-ethnicisation of international sport, Jansen e*t al* (2018) point towards the fact that much nationality swapping involves people switching allegiance to their parents’ country of origin. They refer to this as reverberative causation where previous migrations give rise to a subsequent migration of loyalty to the country of family origin. Ultimately, we might argue that there are different categories of swapping here; one is people playing for a country they have a clear link to, through growing up there or having a family connection back to it. The cases of fast-tracked citizenship spurred by sporting prowess are rarer. The remainder of this paper focuses on male football players with African heritage representing European countries and on European-born players choosing to represent African teams in recent major football tournaments.

**‘African’ Players in European Teams**

At the 2018 FIFA World Cup the 23 man squads of eight European countries included players either born in Africa or of African parentage; a total of 42 players or the equivalent of almost two full squads (Table 1). In the case of France this has been a long-standing phenomenon, as already noted, but another interesting example is that of Belgium. The current multi-ethnic Belgian team features players from a range of immigrant backgrounds. These include Belgian-born Marouane Fellaini, whose father was a Moroccan footballer, Romelu Lukaku whose father played for Zaire (now DR Congo) and Dedrick Boyata whose father was also a footballing migrant from what is now DR Congo. One generation advanced their careers through migration to Europe, conferring their sons with Belgian citizenship. More broadly, there is a diaspora of players growing up in European countries who they then represent on the international football stage.

**Table 1: ‘African’ players in squads of European countries, World Cup Finals 2018**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Country | Number of players born in Africa  | Players with African parentage |
| France | 2 | 12 |
| Belgium | 0 | 9 |
| Switzerland | 5 | 2 |
| Portugal | 2 | 2 |
| Germany | 0 | 3 |
| England | 0 | 2 |
| Sweden | 0 | 2 |
| Denmark | 1 | 0 |

Source: FIFA

As suggested earlier, reactions to this phenomenon are varied. The multi-ethnic composition of the French team has long drawn the ire of the far right who have portrayed the teams of recent decades as not being wholly French. The Frenchness of Kylian Mbappé, Pogba and others, many of whom grew up in the often-stigmatised *banlieues* of Paris, is elided as they are seen pejoratively as ‘not French’, ‘not French enough’ or not ‘really French’. Marine le Pen, the present leader of *Rassemblement National* (the re-named *Front Nationale*) said some years previously that the problem with the French team was they had “another nationality in their hearts” (quoted in Downing 2018). This fits within a wider socio-political context in which non-white French citizens are depicted as being not really French and are regarded with persistent suspicion and hostility (Pierrot 2018). At the more liberal end of the spectrum many have been happy to celebrate the French team’s diversity and hail the players as symbols of a unified country. This response has been mirrored in the comments of some of the players themselves in the wake of World Cup victory. Blaise Matuidi (whose parents hail from Angola and DR Congo) said “the diversity we have in this team is in the image of our beautiful country. We proudly represent France” (quoted in White 2018) while Antoine Griezmann (who is of German and Portuguese descent) said:

“that’s the France we love. They are different origins but we are all united. It’s the same in our team; there are many players who come from different horizons but we do have the same state of mind. We all play for the same jersey, for the cockerel and for our country” (quoted in Walker 2018).

The squad’s strong African connections led to some hailing it as a team of immigrants or as an ‘African’ team. While this pan-African view may be benign and well-intentioned, it ignores the reality of the players’ lives and experiences growing up in France. As with the more malign right wing view, this perspective also leads to the players Frenchness being obscured while simultaneously falling into the trap of reducing Africa to a singular homogenous entity. The development of these players, and also those of Belgium, owes much to the youth development structures in both those countries. The players’ lives and careers have been shaped by France as well as their family background. Rather than trying to portray the players as possessing a singular identity as ‘French’ or ‘African’ or ‘migrant’, it is surely more accurate to see them as all of these things and more besides.

Reactions from players themselves often reflect the complexity of identity. Vincent Kompany (born in Brussels to a Congolese father and Belgian mother) exemplifies one response, indicating a strong sense of a multiple identity:

“I have a very strong relationship with Congo. I’m not half Belgian and half Congolese; I’m 100 per cent Belgian and 100 per cent Congolese. It’s a wealth to me to have those two cultural backgrounds” (quoted in Rainbow 2012).

In a sense it might be said that Kompany is representing the complexity of his family background and not just Belgium. For other players it might be argued they represent their ancestral land through playing for their adopted one. Patrick Vieira, a member of the successful 1998 French team, could be said to represent Senegal through his presence in a World Cup winning team. His team-mate, Marcel Desailly may have been a French international, but his Ghanaian roots were never far from the surface. Zinedine Zidane, one of the best French players of all time, also explicitly alluded to his Algerian roots (though he generally tended to be reticent on the subject): “Everyday I think about where I come from and I am still proud to be who I am: first a Kabyle from La Castellane, then an Algerian from Marseille, and then a Frenchman” (quoted in Hussey 2004).

While some players of migrant origin might be accepted as genuine representatives of the nation, this may sometimes be highly conditional. In the aftermath of Germany’s surprise early exit from the 2018 World Cup finals, the performance of their midfielder Mesut Özil came in for considerable criticism. Some of this negative reaction was explicitly linked to his Turkish family origins. He subsequently retired from international football citing what he saw as a questioning of his loyalty to Germany. Özil felt he was seen as “German when we win, but I am an immigrant when we lose” (quoted in Hirsch 2018). A player’s difference (particularly when it extends to skin colour) may appear unimportant when he and his team are doing well but if his performances fall short of expectations then he may become less than fully Belgian/French/Swiss etc. This point was further highlighted by Belgium’s Lukaku (2018) who, prior to the 2018 World Cup, spoke of being hailed as Belgian when he does well but feeling that his Congolese background is highlighted when he is seen to underperform. Lukaku’s experience echoes those of other sports stars whose status as national ‘hero’ may quickly transform to a racialized ‘other’ whose migrant background is emphasised when they fall off their pedestal as, for example, in the case of Canadian athlete Ben Johnson (Jackson 1998)

**Recapturing the diaspora**

While many players of African descent decide to represent the country in which they have grown up, many others do not, opting instead to play for their country of family origins. Amongst African countries, Morocco and Algeria have for some time been prominent in exploiting their diasporas and relying heavily on French-born players of Algerian or Moroccan descent. The selection of second-generation Algerians or Moroccans clearly expands the pool of available talent for their national teams. Some of these are players who had previously represented France in youth or under-age teams but subsequently elected to play for the country of their parents at senior international level. These apparent switches in national allegiance are by no means unique to African teams and, from the point of view of the national footballing authorities involved, there is a strongly pragmatic component here, as suggested earlier. In the case of many African countries, their colonial history and associated migrant links mean there are many European-born footballers with close ethnic and family ties to those countries—so it makes pragmatic sense to tap into that resource.

The extent of the phenomenon can be assessed through an examination of the composition of national teams competing at the 2017 Africa Cup of Nations (Table 2). Of the 368 players registered in the tournament, 93 (just over 25 percent) were born outside the country they were representing. The vast majority of these were born in France (69 or 19 percent of the total). In addition, a further 22 players grew up in a country other than the one in which they were born; in this case all were European countries. If these are added to the 93, then approaching one third of players at the tournament were playing for a country they either were not born in or had not lived in since early childhood. Over one fifth of players in the tournament had been born or grew up in France. Additionally, a small number of players had ‘transferred’ allegiance between African countries.

There is a distinct geography to this. Out of the 16 teams competing in the finals, only three countries (Egypt, Zimbabwe and Uganda) had no foreign-born players in their 23 man squads. At the other extreme, 18 of Morocco’s squad were born outside the country, 11 of them in France. Of the five Moroccan born, one grew up in Germany and one in Belgium. Thirteen of Algeria’s squad were born in France, as were nine of Mali’s squad. At the 2018 World Cup, 82 football players at that tournament were born in countries other than the one they played for. 50 players in total were born in France, representing five different countries (France, Portugal, Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal). Five African countries participated in the finals. While Egypt’s squad of 23 contained only one European-born player, Morocco had 15, plus another two who grew up in Europe, Tunisia and Senegal each had nine while Nigeria had four (plus two more who grew up in Europe). In total, 38 players for these five countries were born in Europe, the vast majority in France (25). It would seem that francophone African countries in north and west Africa are more prone to draw on their diasporas with France’s colonial past leaving a major footprint on Africa’s sporting present.

**Table 2 Players playing for another country by country of birth or upbringing, Africa Cup of Nations 2017**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Country | Number of players born there | Number of players who grew up there |
| France | 69 | 5 |
| Ivory Coast | 6 | 0 |
| Senegal | 4 | 0 |
| Belgium  | 4 | 4 |
| Portugal | 2 | 9 |
| Spain | 2 | 0 |
| Netherlands | 2 | 1 |
| Sweden | 1 | 0 |
| Switzerland | 1 | 0 |
| England | 1 | 2 |
| Canada | 1 | 0 |
| Germany | 0 | 1 |

Source: FIFA

The details above highlight the fluidity and multi-layered nature of national identity. Players with an African family background make decisions on whether to represent their country of birth or upbringing while others opt for their country of family origin. The reasons for this may differ between individuals. When exploring this issue in relation to players from the Republic of Ireland, Holmes and Storey (2011) suggest that some players may be motivated by a sense of cultural affinity while for others there may be a more functional component involved whereby a player sees an opportunity to play international football and advance their career through the enhanced profile it might offer. From the point of view of the players of African origin, the decision to transfer allegiance may also be pragmatic, affording the possibility of playing international football leading in turn to greater recognition and, perhaps, enhanced financial and other career rewards. However, it would be simplistic to assume that pragmatic concerns always govern such decisions. For some players there may be a clear sense of identity, while for others there is an acknowledgment of a more complex sense of self. The sizeable number of players who switch allegiance between under-age national teams before finally deciding on a country might suggest strong instrumental motivations but senses of identity at the age of 16 may subtly shift as time goes by so that by later teens or early 20s players may feel somewhat differently. A hitherto latent identity may come to the fore or assume greater prominence. Equally, as sporting careers develop, players may make strategic choices as they contemplate future career options and opportunities (Purdy *et al* 2017).

Some players have made it clear in press interviews that identity issues are significant. For example, the French-born former Cameroon international Benoît Assou-Ekotta (son of a migrant Cameroonian footballer) has expressed his feelings unequivocally:

“Me playing for Cameroon was a natural and normal thing. I have no feeling for the France national team; it just doesn't exist. When people ask of my generation in France, ‘Where are you from?’, they will reply Morocco, Algeria, Cameroon or wherever” (quoted in Hytner 2010).

His comments appear to reflect a wider set of issues relating to marginalisation and discrimination surrounding ethnic minority groups in France and elsewhere highlighting disaffection and a rejection of French identity (Dikeç 2007)*.* Meanwhile, a sense of dual identity is revealed by Morocco’s Paris-born midfielder Sofiane Boufal who likened the dilemma of choosing to play for France or Morocco as having to choose between ‘”my mother and my father”. When he opted for Morocco he said “I won’t forget what France gave me. It helped me grow up, it welcomed my parents” (quoted in Kuper 2018).

More functional connections might be discerned in the case of Swiss-born Joel Kiassumbua In a television programme, the then Swiss youth international goalkeeper displayed little interest in his father’s country of DR Congo (Hess 2014). Ironically, he has subsequently ended up playing for them at senior level. In 2018 Saido Berahino, born in Burundi but who came to the United Kingdom as a refugee at the age of ten indicated he wished to swap from England (who he has represented on numerous occasions at under-age level) to Burundi. Five years earlier in a 2013 interview he spoke of his desire to play for England in highly functional terms:

“It’s a non-starter. I want to play at the best level with the best players at the best tournaments. Burundi is motherland to me. I will always be a Burundian regardless of what happens, even if I become a successful Premier League player. I will still have the Burundi culture in me. Playing for England is totally different. They have given me a second chance in life, provided my family with a different type of lifestyle. I feel very, very grateful to what England have done for me and my family. So, when I play for England, I play with passion and excitement, joy and desire to win’’(quoted in Winter 2013).

Like many others the failure to advance to senior level leads to a decision to represent another country. However, we need to be careful not to read too much into such decisions as it may ultimately come down to the simple issue of which country asks first (Early 2018). Paul Pogba may be happy to represent France though, had he been less gifted, the French opportunity would likely not have arisen, and he might well have followed his brothers’ decisions to represent their parent’s country of Guinea. While instrumentalist motivations may underpin many decisions, these surely also reflect the duality of the players’ identities.

While a player’s background will clearly shape their self-identity, it is also worth bearing in mind that the wider socio-political context may have a bearing on the decisions taken by individuals. Simon Kuper (2018) has recently suggested that the shifting social and political environment in western Europe and an increased sense of ‘othering’ those of Arab backgrounds in the post 9-11 context, has resulted in some, who might otherwise have been comfortable identifying with the European country they grew up in, instead feeling unwanted and less than a proper citizen. In turn this leads to a heightened identification with their country of family origin. The complexities of this are highlighted by Van Sterkenburg (2013) in exploring the split loyalties of Dutch football supporters of Moroccan origin. That duality results in Dutch international footballers of Moroccan origin being seen to represent the ethnic identity of sections of their support. It is also worth noting there may be other problematic elements accompanying a player’s decision to ‘swap’ nationality. Players who opt to play for a country in which they may never have lived brings with it some potential problems of acceptance. Players from ‘abroad’ may be perceived as not being quite as emotionally attached as someone who grew up in the country, a perception perhaps exacerbated by linguistic and other cultural differences. There may also be resentment from home-grown players who lose out to ‘imports’ further aggravating tensions between ‘natives’ and ‘foreigners’. On the other hand, players who reject a call-up may, in some instances, find themselves branded as traitors (Kuper 2018). Such tensions may be more likely in some sports and in certain specific contexts.

**Conclusions**

Sport offers a way to explore the complexities of national identity and citizenship. National football associations select players, generally on instrumental grounds. In turn, players who have the option, display a degree of agency in choosing their country based on instrumental or cultural reasons or a combination of these. Fans and media react to this in accordance with a mixture of feelings based on the players’ performances and their own perspective on the nation. From the point of view of national footballing associations there is a desire to select the strongest possible team and for some African countries (and others) that involves the utilisation of the regulations in order to capture talent that may have been born and raised elsewhere. While this indicates a somewhat elastic and flexible approach to identity, it also reflects the colonial and migratory connections that link African countries with European ones. The presence of players of African origin in the French, Belgian and some other European teams might be seen as a continued draining of resources and capturing of talent; but this is juxtaposed with the re-appropriation of members of the diaspora. This latter reverberative representation might be seen to act as some compensation for weak domestic league structure and generally poor footballing infrastructure.

While some observers might prefer to see identity in simplistic either/or terms, for many the reality is much more complex and a key issue is the on-going reluctance to recognise the duality and multiplicity of identity. In part this is a consequence of the structures within which international sport operates through which players are defined in singular terms. However, the multiple nature of identity becomes readily apparent when we look at some members of the French World Cup winning squad. Kylian Mbappé is the son of a Cameroonian father and Algerian mother but was born and grew up in Paris. Similarly, Blaise Matuidi was born in Toulouse, grew up in Paris, the son of an Angolan father and Congolese mother. Reducing these multi-layered backgrounds to a singular identity makes little sense, while denying the players’ Frenchness is also to deny their reality. Although players may have elected to play for their European home, this does not necessarily mean an abandoning of their African roots. We need to be wary of seeing the choices players make as an all-or-nothing statement of identity or allegiance. What is going on here is not so much a swapping of nationalities but a decision to utilise the sporting citizenship available whether for careerist ends or to emphasise one facet of their identity. Players with a cosmopolitian background are displaying agency in selecting their identity for sporting purposes. We also need to be mindful of the present saturation coverage of the sport in all forms of media. Football players generally avoid alienating their fans so that displays of allegiance and wrapping themselves in the national flag might be seen partly as expressions of identity but also as sensible responses to fan expectations and a means to avoid accusations of disloyalty. Whatever the feelings and motivations of players, the declaration of a sporting nationality that may differ from an ‘official’ one reinforces the need to see identities as fluid, flexible and contingent rather than fixed and unchanging.

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