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world-system theory and beyond**

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Explaining the “muscle drain” of African football players: world-system theory and beyond

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Introduction

In this paper I provide some theoretical and analytical tools to explain the presence of African footballers abroad. I'll first introduce the way in which the world-system theory has been applied to the case of international sportsmen's migration. For the second part, I shall present the main features of the connectionist framework that I have elaborated in the context of my PhD thesis¹.

¹ The thesis will be presented in June 2008 at the University of Neuchâtel. The title is “Production de footballeurs, réseaux marchands et mobilités professionnelles dans l'économie globale. Le cas des joueurs africains en Europe”.

Quantifying the African footballers' presence in Europe

During the 2002/2003 season, 1156 players recruited in Africa were under contract with professional and semi-professional clubs of UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) countries². They represented 18.6% of the total amount of foreign players.

Map 1: European countries receiving African football players (2002/2003)

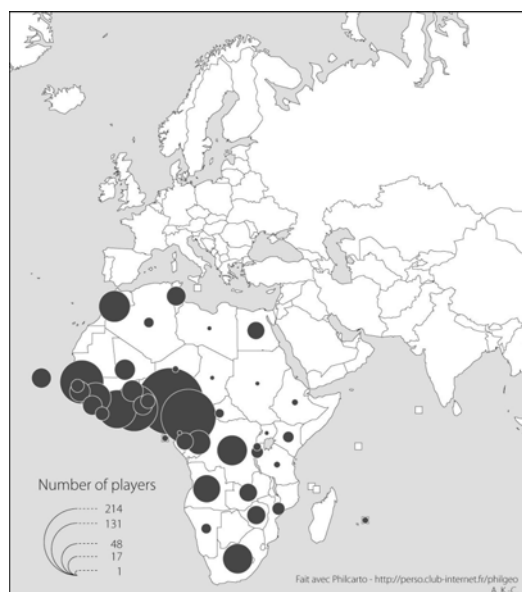


The main receiver countries are the former colonial nations, particularly France, Portugal and Belgium. Italian and German clubs also import many African players, while English clubs recruit a relatively small number of players from this continent. Except in the British case³, we can observe the persistence of networks that are part of a colonial legacy, even if African players are now also very often employed in countries such as, among others, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, Greece, Switzerland and Malta.

² This statistical study took into account a total of 78 leagues.

³ In England, only players who have played at least three quarters of the matches of their national teams during the two years preceding their eventual transfer to an English club can obtain a work permit. As the majority of African squads are made up of expatriate players, it is almost impossible for an African football player to migrate directly to England.

Map 2: African countries supplying players destined for Europe (2002/2003)



Among the supplier countries, Western Africa has emerged as being the area most concerned with these movements. This region is the premier provider of players to European clubs. Numerous players from Sub-Saharan Africa are also signed by Maghrebian clubs (in particular Morocco, Tunisia and Libya), in the hope of being subsequently transferred to Europe. By comparison to Western Africa, Eastern Africa remains unaffected by the flux of African Football players towards Europe.

The number of players recruited in Africa under contract with clubs of the five main European leagues (England, Spain, Italy, Germany, France) has strongly increased between 1995 and 2005, passing from 49 to 160. The rate of players recruited in Africa among foreigners has also augmented from 10.6 % to 16.1% (Poli, Ravenel 2006)⁴.

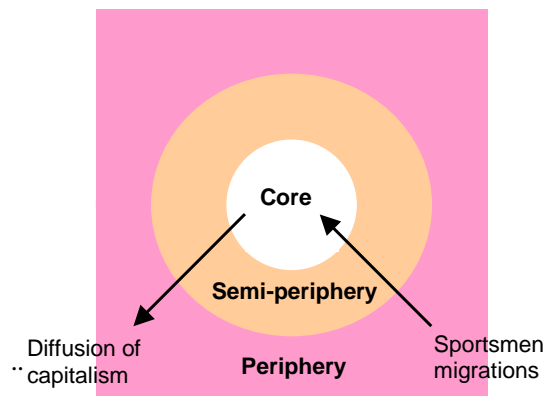
Sportsmen migrations and the world-system theory

Up until now, sportsmen migrations on an international scale have been mostly analysed in the light of the world-system theory. Jonathan Magee and John Sugden (2002), for example, have elaborated a model (Graph 1) in which they link together the diffusion of football from the core (Europe), to the semi-periphery (South and Central America) and the periphery (Af-

⁴ See also the website of the Professional Football Players' Observatory: www.eurofootplayers.org.

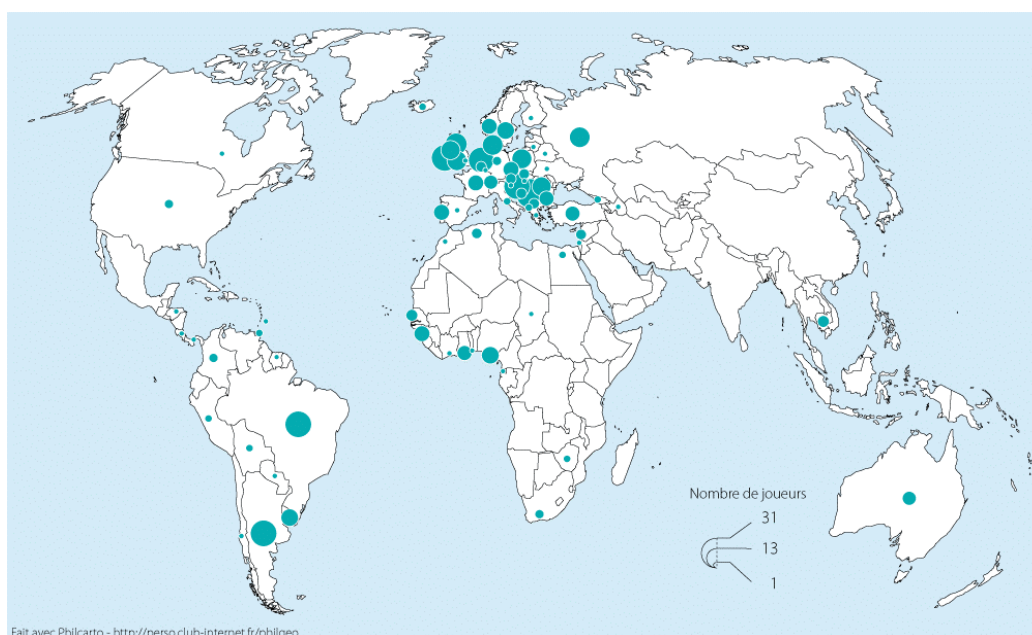
rica, Asia, Oceania and North America), with the development of football players' migrations in the reverse sense, from the periphery to the core. Indeed, from the world-system theory perspective, *“the international flow of labor follows the international flow of goods and capital, but in the opposite direction”* (Massey and others, 1993: 197).

Graph 1: the world-system theory scheme



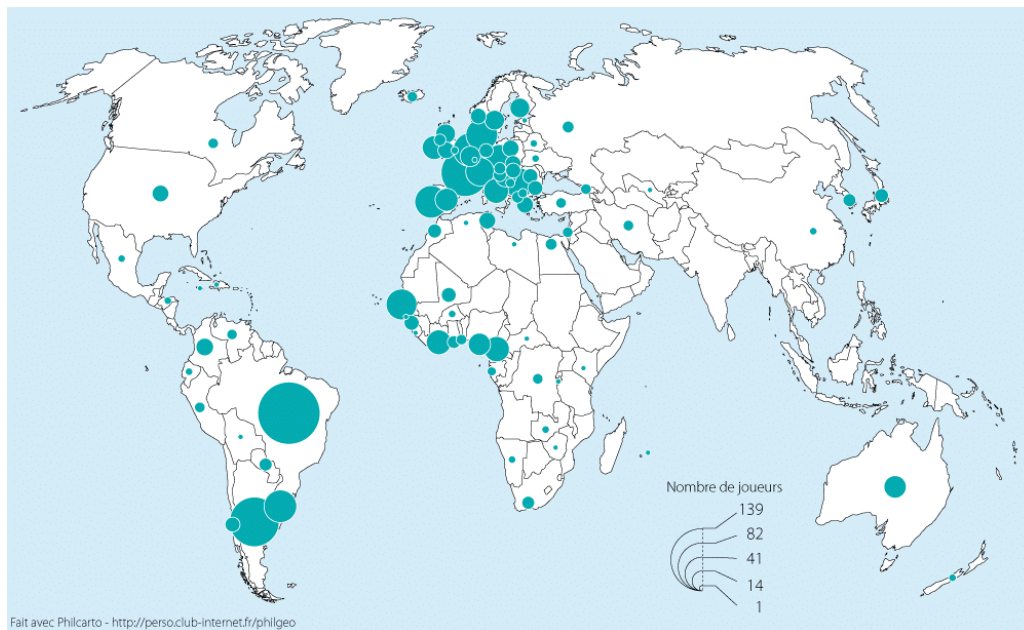
From 1995 to 2005, the number of players recruited outside Europe by the clubs of the five main European leagues has increased from 146 to 496. These players represent nowadays 49.7% of the total number of players employed by these clubs. This percentage was of 31.5% in 1995.

Map 3: number and origin of foreign players (1995/1996 season, first level of competition in England, Spain, Italy, Germany and France)



Fait avec Philcarto - <http://perso.club-internet.fr/philgeo>

Map 4: number and origin of foreign players (2005/2006 season, first level of competition in England, Spain, Italy, Germany and France)



According to the world-system theory, the increasing presence of players coming from peripheral countries to core ones, a phenomenon which has been described as “muscle” or “brawn” drain (Bale 1991), has to be interpreted as the sign of a multi-layered domination of the latter over the former. Authors using the world-system theory framework have thus the tendency to envisage the functioning of the world as if the “core” acts and dominates; while the “periphery” is passive and is dominated. Power, indeed, tend to be seen as a position associated with a territory, rather than a practice associated with actors.

Similar to Dicken, Olds and Yeung, I “see power as the capacity of exercise that is realized only through the process of exercising” (2001: 93). From this perspective, to understand the international migration of African football players, it is not sufficient to refer to blocks of homogeneous territories which “naturally” attract thousands of young men every year, but it is indispensable to analyse the daily action of a multitude of actors that range from European clubs’ officials and players’ agents, to African football Federations’ employees and local recruiters. In several ways, all of these actors play a crucial role in the “well-oiled” functioning of the football players’ international trade.

Beyond the world system theory

The presence of African footballers in Europe reflects the existence of networks in which are integrated many interdependent actors. By their daily action, they bind the two continents thus making the migration of young players possible. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases the latter don't come to Europe solely by their own initiative. On the contrary, their migration is organized and governed either directly by European clubs, or by intermediaries such as players' agents.

European clubs follow different strategies for the detection and transfer of young football players from African countries. Some clubs employ salaried recruiters who focus their action in Africa. Sometimes, these recruiters are resident on the continent. This is notably the case of Tom Vernon, an expatriated English man who has lived in Ghana since 1999 and works for Manchester United. Other clubs' recruiters specialized in the scouting of young African players are not resident in the continent, but work closely together with locally based tipsters.

Other European clubs are present in Africa through partnership agreements according to which they help local academies to train young footballers in exchange for options allowing them to pick the best players. In 2006, for example, the club of Charlton reached a partnership agreement with the ASEC Mimosas club of Abidjan. According to this agreement, Charlton can recruit and loan out to the Belgian club of Germinal Beershoot Antwerp two locally trained players each year in exchange for approximately 400.000 euros.

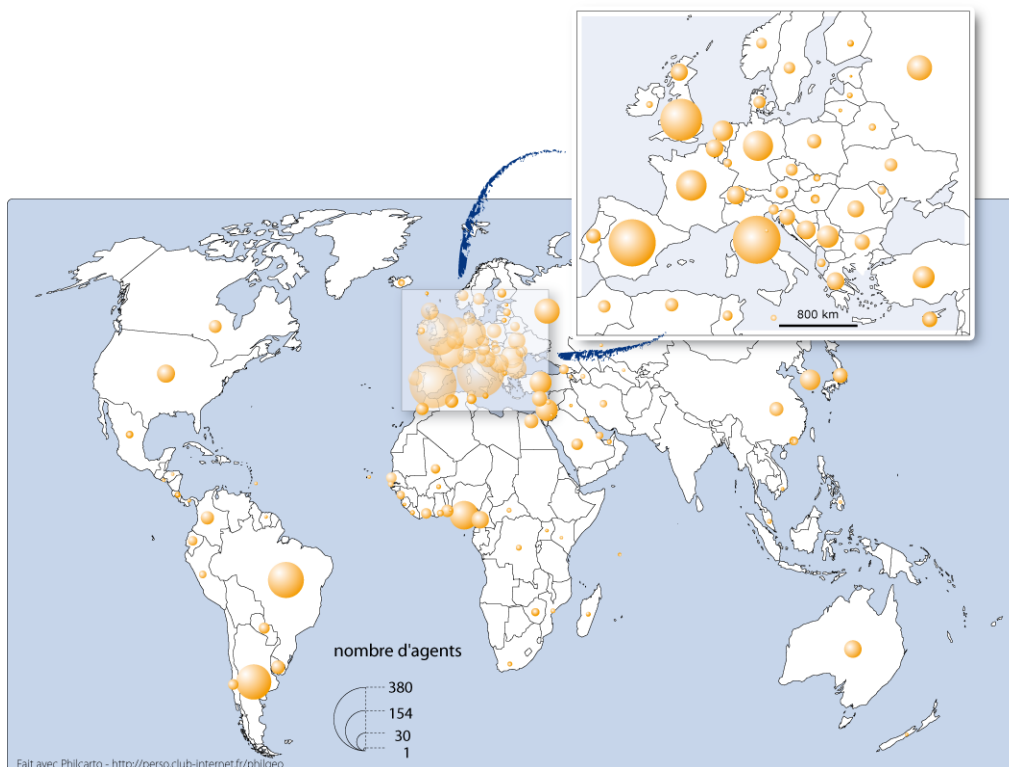
A few European clubs have bought or created their own academies in Africa. This is notably the case of Ajax Amsterdam and Feyenoord Rotterdam. The first club has acquired 51% of the stake of a club in Cape Town, which has been renamed Ajax Cape Town, while the second one owns an academy in Ghana, called Fetteh Football Academy.

The migratory channels (Findlay, Li 1998) through which African football players are transferred in Europe have not only been put in place by European clubs. The example of the Kadji Sport Academy (KSA) in Douala shows that local businessmen are also involved. The KSA was created in the Nineties by Gilbert Kadji, the son of the owner of one of the biggest breweries in the country. Since then, more than forty players of this Academy have been transferred to Europe, such as, among others, Samuel Eto'o or the former FC Basel player Hervé Tum. These transfers have been organized directly from Africa, through members of the Cameroonian diaspora in France. The latter take charge of the young players when they come

to Europe for trials, and act as middlemen between the owner of the Academy and the recruiting clubs.

Beside clubs, players' agents are also very active in the scouting and the transfer of African players to Europe. These intermediaries work within agencies or in a more individual way. To officially practise this profession, they need to have passed a special test, which is organized by the football federation in the country where they live. Most of the players' agents with a licence are based in Europe, where the clubs can afford to pay high sums for the signing of a player.

Map 5: number and origin of licensed player agents (November 2006)



Many of the players' agents living in Europe are also connected to Africa. Similar to clubs, this connection is most often made possible by the remuneration of tipsters that work for them on a local level. The role of these tipsters, which often occupy important positions in African football federations and national youth teams, is also to organize tournaments during the periods when the agent travel to Africa. Once a young player has been discovered, the players' agent undertakes the necessary steps to provide the player with a short-term visa. In exchange for this, the player is required to sign a contract according to which the agent is the only per-

son that can negotiate with recruiting clubs. So, if a European club wants to buy the player, the agent is in the position to demand a commission fee. This system is at the origin of abuses, especially when the agent puts its self-interest ahead of that of the player.

In recent years, we have also observed an increasing number of players' agents licensed by African football federations. This is notably the case of Amadou Diaby, a Guinean musical promoter that has recently created a football players' agency in Conakry with a French associate also living in Guinea. While Diaby flies to and back Guinea and France, its main residence is in Conakry. The company, Football Afric Management, is building up a football academy in Dubréka, 40 kilometres from Conakry. The Guinean State has given him grounds free of charge, while RC Strasbourg has expressed interest in partially finance the operational budget of the structure and to give technical assistance, in exchange to the right of pick the best locally trained footballers.

In Ghana, another African contractor has created a players' agency called Global Soccer Management, which recruits and manages a number of footballers across the continent. Ibrahim Sly Tetteh is also the president of the club of Liberty Professionals FC, and the managing director of Liberty Sports Ltd. This society has affiliates in Europe and governs the transfer rights of the players of the Liberty Professionals Academy, where several very successful players such as Michal Essien and Sulley Muntari have been trained.

Members of the African diaspora in Europe are also very active in transferring players from Africa. The licensed player agent Alfred Obrou, for example, takes advantage of his residence in Stockholm to transfer Ivorian players to clubs in Scandinavia. To achieving this, he works among others together with the ASEC Mimosas Abidjan president Roger Ouégnin.

Conclusion: for a connectionist approach

If the world-system theory provides an analytical framework to understand the general geo-economic logic underlying the presence of African football players in Europe, it doesn't provide us with the tools to understand the ways in which these migrations occur. The adoption of a connectionist perspective (Meyer 2001) based on the concepts of channels and networks allows us to understand that African-based actors also very active in the international trade of African footballers.

This approach also permits us to take into account the crucial role played by intermediaries in putting in relation the offer and the demand of labour on a transnational scale, and in governing the entry of young African footballers in foreign labour markets. It is at the level of the empirical functioning of football players' transfer's networks that the connectionist approach enable to take into account the broader question of the dissymmetrical power relationships existing in the context of the international division of labour on a global scale.

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