

**The African Turning Point in European Football:  
Immigration Experiences from Cameroonian and Algerian Footballers in France during  
the 1980s**

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**Introduction**

If the number of players sharing an African origin is now significant and relatively accepted in European football,<sup>1</sup> it is the consequence of a story starting during the 1980s,<sup>2</sup> and part of the transformation of football in Europe. From this period, there was an increase in the number of African footballers playing for professional clubs. There were more diverse migration routes and geographical areas involved in an increasingly global football market<sup>3</sup> and the profession of sports agent was created.<sup>4</sup> According to the geographer Raffaele Poli, ‘between 1960 and 2005, there was a general increase in the number of footballers arriving in France that was closely linked to the relaxation of the legal restrictions that had long kept international movements of this kind at an artificially low level’.<sup>5</sup> In the meantime, according to historian Paul Dietschy, ‘since the early 2000s, the number of African players in the European professional leagues has become huge. As of the 2002–2003 season, there were 1,156 players’.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore not surprising that the monthly *Afrique Magazine* in December 2004 listed 647 African footballers or players of African origin (of thirty-two different nationalities) who had been selected or were eligible for selection for an African national team, playing in Europe’s first divisions in the 2004–05 season. Nigeria had the most players in European first divisions (105), followed by Cameroon (84), the Ivory Coast (58) Senegal (58), and Ghana (52).

Our work is focused on the very beginning of the process which can be considered as an ‘Africanization’ of European football, and which contributed to the creation of a ‘new image of Africa’.<sup>7</sup> We will mainly try to highlight and understand how the main characters of this story, especially the players, have lived their European experience. Although during the 1982 World Cup ‘neither Algeria nor Cameroon fitted with the image of a gifted but immature team representing a poor, underdeveloped continent’,<sup>8</sup> a number of factors served as a reminder that the credibility of African footballers at the time was still very much called into question.

In this study, we intend to explore the plight of the sporting immigrant in Europe,<sup>9</sup> by extending the research of Pierre Lanfranchi and Alfred Wahl on the history of professional

footballers in France,<sup>10</sup> and that of geographer Raffaele Poli on the career paths of Cameroonian players in Switzerland, research which highlighted their isolation and transnational bonds.<sup>11</sup> Beyond the varied and often overlooked paths these players<sup>12</sup> took after retirement from football, we shall focus on their experiences in Europe in the 1980s and on the links they maintained with their country of origin. What happened in terms of their football career when they arrived in France? What resources (financial, material and human) did they have access to on their arrival? What kind of difficulties did they come up against in making a place for themselves in European football in the 1980s? And what was their relationship with their country of origin?

The information used in this study is mainly drawn from nine semi-structured interviews conducted between 2006 and 2012, as part of doctoral research, with Cameroonian<sup>13</sup> and Algerian<sup>14</sup> footballers who played in France in the early 1980s. We interviewed four players who were born and trained in Algeria and who were selected for the 1982 World Cup: Salah Assad, Rabah Madjer, Tedj Bensaoula and Mahmoud Guendouz. We also interviewed five Cameroonian players, three of whom (Roger Milla, Joseph-Antoine Bell and Louis-Paul M'Fédé) had considerable international experience, while the other two (Jean-Claude Djengué and Ismaël Pierre Beb) spent most of their footballing career in Cameroon. They were selected several times for the national team although they also tried their luck in France. Thus, the revelation of common elements between Cameroonian and Algerian players stood alongside differences between the two cases and the career trajectories remained bound to the national specificities of the migratory traditions and to the individual resources of each player.

While common threads run through the career paths of the Algerian and Cameroonian players, this obviously does not negate the differences in the players' careers that stemmed from the migratory traditions specific to each country and the individual resources of each player. Nevertheless, this quest for common features allows us to trace some of the broader themes in the careers of African footballers that are unrelated to the particularities of any single country.

### **Europe as a new attraction for African players**

From the beginning of the 1980s, Europe's doors were gradually opening up to African players as national restrictions were relaxed and Europe witnessed the performances of the national teams of Algeria and Cameroon in the 1982 World Cup.

Moreover, two political decisions taken in quick succession, first by FIFA and then by the Confederation of African Football (CAF), contributed to the growing number of African footballers playing in European leagues. In 1981, FIFA ‘obliged clubs to release players for all World Cup qualifying and final matches’.<sup>15</sup> A year later, CAF also amended its regulations and allowed African national teams to select as many players working outside the continent of Africa as they wished. These two new decisions made migration to Europe more appealing for African footballers because they were no longer at risk of not being selected for the national team. For their part, the African national teams also benefited from this form of ‘exogenism’<sup>16</sup> because by drawing on the pool of binational players, they had less need to be involved in training their players.

The remarkable performances of both Cameroon and Algeria in the 1982 World Cup were a further incentive for European clubs to sign players from Africa, a continent with a brand-new image. While Algeria swept to a shock 2-1 victory in their first match against an impressive West German line-up,<sup>17</sup> the Cameroon team, as noticed by Paul Dietschy and Claude Kemo-Keimbou:

impressed onlookers and the Spanish crowd with their athleticism and organization, the striking power of their players, and the reliability of their captain and goalkeeper Thomas N’Kono, but they disappointed by their failure to turn those skills into results and their inability to give up their particularly cautious strategy.<sup>18</sup>

A far cry from the failure of Zaire during the 1974 World Cup in Germany, certain players stood out and caught the eye of a number of scouts. That was when Europe’s football authorities became aware of the huge recruitment potential among African players. Immediately after the World Cup, early in the 1982–3 season, and sometimes with the backing of the Cameroon authorities, French clubs signed five Cameroon players. Thomas N’Kono, Cameroon’s goalkeeper, did not go to France but was signed by RCD Espanyol de Barcelona, but five more ‘Indomitable Lions’ (as the Cameroon team were nicknamed) went on to join top French clubs: Maurice Madiba, Eugène Ekéké, Grégoire M’Bida, Louis-Paul M’Fédé and Jean-Claude Pagal. Although only one of those five players (M’Bida) had played in the 1982 World Cup, Cameroon’s footballers as a whole went on to gain a new credibility, bolstered by their victory in the African Cup of Nations in 1984. It was in fact that very victory that led to Théophile Abega being transferred from Canon Yaoundé to Toulouse.

As far as the Algerian team was concerned, four internationals who were born in Algeria and trained and played there, and who had taken part in the World Cup in Spain in

1982, were officially authorized by the Algerian Football Federation (FAF) to work in France: Salah Assad went to FC Mulhouse in 1982, Rabah Madjer to RC Paris in 1983, Tedj Bensaoula to Havre AC the same year, and Mahmoud Guendouz to FC Martigues in 1984. Mostly attackers, all of them enjoyed a priori a certain level of protection and prerogatives guaranteed by a contract signed with the FAF in Algeria. Thanks to some fierce bargaining, their future clubs set their salaries and bonuses at a high level.<sup>19</sup> The negotiations included the requirement that the French clubs allow the footballers to play for the national Algerian team if called upon. This meant that their future employers would not urge them (as happened to Ali Bencheikh<sup>20</sup> at Nantes FC in 1978 and Djamel Tlemçani<sup>21</sup> at Rouen in 1982) to acquire French nationality nor would they have pressure put on them when the time came to renew their residence permit (Nasser Oughlis<sup>22</sup> at Caen in 1980).

### **Low-key performances**

In sporting terms, none of our four Algerian interviewees, playing mainly in the second division, managed to achieve long-lasting success. Salah Assad, the creator of the ‘Ghoraf’,<sup>23</sup> scored thirteen goals in twenty-six matches in his first season at FC Mulhouse in 1982. However, the following year, at Paris Saint-Germain, having just been dubbed the best winger in the French first division, he played in only nine games and scored only one goal. Between 1984 and 1986, back at Mulhouse, now established in the second division, he scored an average of only eight goals in the twenty-seven matches played each season.

Tedj Bensaoula found himself in the same situation: he played for Le Havre AC in the second division between 1983 and 1985, scoring an average of seven goals in twenty-five matches played each season. The former centre forward from Mouloudia Pétrolier d’Oran contributed brilliantly to his club’s rise to the first division in 1984 but failed to secure his place in the team the following season, playing only one match in two, and scoring only two goals. Finding himself clubless, he had no option but to return to the second division, this time with USL Dunkerque, where he experienced a ‘bumpy season’.<sup>24</sup>

Mahmoud Guendouz also failed to reach the top flight in France. For this international central defender, his first season (1984–5) with Martigues in the second division was a success (thirty matches played) but in the second season (1985–6), he lost his starting place, being selected for only two matches. As for Rabah Madjer, well before his triumph in Europe with FC Porto in 1987, he played for RC Paris. In his first season in the second division (1983–4), he scored twenty goals in twenty-seven matches but failed to maintain this in the following season in the first division, scoring only three goals in twenty-three matches.

The arrival of Cameroonian footballers at the end of the 1970s was similarly challenging at times. Joseph-Antoine Bell, future goalkeeper for the Cameroon national team and winner of two Africa Cups, arrived in France with his parents at the latter end of the 1970s. While pursuing studies in civil engineering, he was playing in the third division for the Matra Racing Club de Paris. After failing to secure a professional contract with the team, he decided to accept a contract in the Ivory Coast and then in Egypt, where he held down a job while pursuing his football career. It was another five years before he returned to France to make his mark with Marseille.

Louis-Paul M'Fédé's story is equally revealing. In his first two years at Rennes, he made only a few sporadic appearances in the first team. This meant he made little contribution to the club's rise to the first division in 1983 or its relegation the following year. During the 1984–5 season, he finally obtained a regular place in the team as a striker. However, this was short-lived as he was back in the shadows for the next two seasons.<sup>25</sup>

Roger Milla's career illustrates perfectly the difficulty that African players had in delivering the same performances with French clubs that they had achieved in Africa with their club teams or the national team. Having been crowned African Footballer of the Year in 1976, Milla arrived in France in 1977 at first-division club Union Sportive Valenciennes Anzin (USVA)<sup>26</sup> and found himself rebuffed. Following his transfer from Tonnerre de Yaoundé, he discovered he was the fourth foreigner at Valenciennes, when the limit was three foreigners per club. As the club was only allowed three foreigners, he spent a year waiting.<sup>27</sup> The club enrolled him at the IUT Valenciennes (University Institute of Technology) so that he could obtain a student card and play in the amateur league with the reserve team. Nevertheless, his salary was not comparable with that of his teammates: 'Everyone else had professional status. Maybe it was because I'd just arrived or because I was African that I got 3,000 (French francs) but there were players getting 15,000, 20,000, 25,000 or more'.<sup>28</sup> The striker's first three seasons in France were also problematic on the field because he scored only eight goals in total. It was only in 1983 when he went to Bastia that his career took off.

### **A friendly reception from a few key figures**

At the beginning of the 1980s, before players' agents existed, the arrival of Cameroonian and Algerian footballers in France was often handled by influential figures and representatives from the world of football. Club executives or presidents, the local mayor or even journalists helped the players to settle in France or simply encouraged them to believe they could succeed there.

Algerian players, who were used to the demands of their own amateur league and of international competitions,<sup>29</sup> appeared to be given an excellent welcome. Salah Assad, dubbed ‘best winger in the world’ and voted African Footballer of the Year of 1982 by *France Football*, remembers the welcome and special treatment he received from some Algerians and the Mulhouse bosses after his arrival at Basel airport.

I spent a month at the Hotel Sofitel then the club found me a beautiful house for my wife and I in a small village, where I was immediately welcomed with open arms. The mayor held a reception in my honour at the town hall. It was very kind. People liked me.<sup>30</sup>

Rabah Madjer was also welcomed by his club’s (RC Paris) bosses as he stepped off the plane in 1983. He stayed for a few months at the beautiful Campanile de Saint-Germain (stay paid by the club).<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Mahmoud Guendouz said that when he arrived in France ‘he didn’t feel homesick. There were plenty of Algerians or French people who’d lived in Algeria before it gained independence’.<sup>32</sup> He added that he ‘had received an excellent welcome, he’d been given an apartment, a car and the plane tickets’.<sup>33</sup> Tedj Bensaoula, on the other hand, had a more difficult start. At Havre AC:

[...] It was difficult at the start, particularly the weather. It was so changeable, it rained a lot, it was icy, all the factories, drizzle, clouds, snow [...] I had to deal with all that. And I had to cope with the different mentality. The professionalism, the rigour, not showing emotions. I sometimes wondered what I was doing there.<sup>34</sup>

However, Bensaoula did gain some solace from the welcome he received from Jean-Pierre Hureau, Le Havre AC president at whose home he would dine from time to time, such was the quasi-familial and paternalistic management approach of the first-division French clubs in the 1980s.<sup>35</sup> Like his compatriots, he enjoyed a relatively comfortable lifestyle and discovered new interests: ‘On Sunday afternoons for example, we’d visit tourist spots like Etretat, Fécamp, Deauville, Honfleur [...] and then we’d go to the cinema. I even went to Paris from time to time, to see Coluche or a rock group or reggae band’.<sup>36</sup> Despite Tedj Bensaoula’s socio-economic progress in France, it is nevertheless telling that he adds that after the initial problems he faced: ‘with time, you force yourself to adapt. Besides, we didn’t have a choice, you had to adapt’.<sup>37</sup> Without sports agents to protect their interests, the Algerian players who arrived in the 1980s faced the same pressures as their predecessors in the 1950s.<sup>38</sup> They had no choice but to give in to the integration demands repeatedly

impressed upon them (a respectful attitude, a sense of sacrifice, discretion as regards fasting during Ramadan) if they wanted to continue working in France and avoid an early return to Algeria, where their living and working conditions were less attractive.

The Cameroonian players also mentioned people who helped make their experience in France more pleasant, once those first few years were behind them. Roger Milla remembered in particular the family or even paternal atmosphere at Montpellier.

What I know is that I found a family. Because I found first of all a president who was very generous, a president who understood and knew how to read football. And I found teammates who weren't the same age as me, they were younger, and we really formed a group. That meant we were able to do wonders in that club for three years. It was really a family club.<sup>39</sup>

Milla subsequently maintained ties with Montpellier when he joined the club's technical staff and moved his family to Montpellier. After his first difficult stint in France, Joseph-Antoine Bell was given some good advice from two prominent figures in French football: Jean Tibert, the editor of *France Football*, and Jean-Philippe Rétacker, journalist for the same weekly magazine and for *l'Equipe*. Bell was unequivocal in stating that:

[...] They encouraged me because I was saying it was closed. I was saying that people's attitudes over there were putting me off going, but those two persuaded me. They thought I had the right attitude to negotiate with the presidents and not put up with what others might have put up with.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the support of certain personalities who welcomed African footballers on their arrival in France, the players were often forced to negotiate their own contracts with their clubs. Bell had a certain level of education and significant professional experience; he was therefore well equipped to hold his own against club presidents. But he was an exception in the 1980s when undertaking studies was no longer a prerequisite for those wishing to leave for France.

### **Dealing with racism**

The warm welcome given by a few prominent figures did not disguise the racism the players faced, which made their integration into France challenging. It was not unusual for Algerian and Cameroonian players to be the target of inappropriate remarks.<sup>41</sup> This phenomenon, which players were reluctant to talk about, was unhelpful both for their progress

on the pitch and for their emotional stability. It is not difficult to imagine the distress and disappointment that Tedj Bensaoula must have experienced when, playing in a match against Paris Saint-Germain, he received ‘threatening letters and phone calls. They were hooligans; the police kept an eye on me and the other striker, the Moroccan Merry Krimau’.<sup>42</sup>

Louis-Paul M’Fédé alludes to a similar unease, although he downplays the extent of it preferring instead to stress how important it was to learn how to ‘deal with it’:

[...] The best response you can give such people is on the pitch. I was a victim of this myself. As soon as I touched the ball they’d start making monkey noises, “oo oo!” and throw bananas. In the end it was me that scored and we won 1-0. That’s the best response.<sup>43</sup>

M’Fédé’s story shows the extent to which players had to be irreproachable on the pitch and give top-quality performances if they were to be ‘accepted’ by crowds who were not used to seeing black footballers. Joseph-Antoine Bell is undoubtedly one of the best placed African footballers to talk about racism. In the early 1980s, after failing to land a professional contract in France he sought work in the Ivory Coast and then Egypt, before returning to France in 1985, to Marseille. Bell explained his lack of success in France the first time round in terms of a form of racism that he noticed in the clubs he played for, particularly at Matra Racing Club de Paris:

At that time, there was a racist attitude, a cultural racism, in other words, people didn’t do it deliberately. When I was training at Matra, they’d say they’d never seen such a good goalkeeper and yet they didn’t sign me. And they’d also say that they’d never seen a black goalkeeper, that a black person couldn’t be a goalkeeper. So that type of racism meant I wasn’t signed. If they had signed me, maybe I wouldn’t have had the same career path, I don’t know. Nevertheless, if they had signed me, I’d have gone to school and played football and therefore wouldn’t have gone to the Ivory Coast.<sup>44</sup>

Although Bell was quick to gain a regular place in the team at Marseille, France did not appear to have made much progress by the mid-1980s in terms of its attitude to black goalkeepers:

When I arrived at Marseille, I can safely say that I wasn’t what the Marseillais were expecting. I mean that I was a lot better than they expected me to be and a good thing too, because the racism I’d experienced the first time round, cultural racism, hadn’t disappeared. It was still there. So the president who took me on was taking a big risk.



Everyone would have taken the piss out of Marseille if I hadn't been any good. Actually, they laughed at them anyway at the start before anyone had seen me play.<sup>45</sup>

These remarks by Bell highlight how great the pressure on him was, and how mentally robust he had to be to handle it.

### **Social support from compatriots on the team**

Despite the presence of certain figures who were able to guide the players, fellow countrymen – similarly for other migrants<sup>46</sup> – were the surest way of forming social connections. But while this provided support at difficult times or was a source of friendships, it was nevertheless not a guarantee of getting signed by a club.

Algerian players arriving in France were welcomed by professional Franco-Algerian players who were already established on the teams. Tedj Bensaoula was quite clear, for example, that Abdelghani Djaadaoui, who was coming to the end of his career and was the only person that he knew at Havre AC, was there to 'Boost his morale'.<sup>47</sup> And according to Rabah Madjer at Racing de Paris, Alim Ben Mabrouk and Fathi Chebel helped him with his integration.<sup>48</sup> Fathi Chebel confirmed this and acknowledged that with Alim Ben Mabrouk, they had somewhat mentored Madjer:

Madjer was an amateur at heart. He was a great player but he didn't know how to prepare for a match. The evening before a match he'd go to the cinema, or other such nonsense. He wasn't a 'pro', whereas we'd been learning our trade for seventeen years, we were part of that world. We gave him a helping hand.<sup>49</sup>

Beyond the players' individual on-pitch performances that determined their status on the team, friendships formed in the changing rooms, where there was a spirit of general respect and tolerance as the Algerians fasted during Ramadan, which also sparked the admiration of supporters.

Although the presence in France of established compatriots helped new arrivals to fit in, it did not necessarily fulfil all their expectations, particularly with regard to being signed by a professional club, as illustrated by Jean-Claude Djengué's failed transfer to St-Etienne. Djengué was born in 1961 and began playing in Cameroon, but left for France with his parents at the end of the 1970s. While pursuing his studies in France, he played for Levallois-Perret and Racing Club Amiens, both in the French third division, in the outskirts of Paris. With a view to being signed by a professional club, he got in touch with Roger Milla, who was playing for St-Etienne at the time.

Djengué stayed with St-Etienne for two weeks and took part in a tournament but was not actually signed by the club. Today, Djengué remains somewhat resentful of Milla, believing he could have easily helped him if he had wanted to. About this situation, he comments: ‘All it needed was a phone call’.<sup>50</sup> When Milla left St-Etienne for Montpellier, that was the end of Djengué’s hopes. He decided to go back to Cameroon and sign with Caiman de Douala. He summarizes: ‘It was after that disappointment, of not being able to have access to the fast track through someone as prominent as Roger Milla that I thought “What’s the point? I may as well go home”’.<sup>51</sup>

Pierre Ismaël Beb also found that the advice of an established compatriot in France turned out not to be useful. Beb tried his luck in France in the early 1980s. With the backing of a fellow Cameroonian on the national team, who acted as manager on that occasion, he had a successful trial for AS Cannes. His compatriot appeared to want to gamble on Beb’s performance to increase his market value and he advised Beb to return to Cameroon and come back at the start of the following season.

At the end of the training sessions, he took the car and we went back to Nice because that’s where we were staying. On the metro he advised me not to stay. He said that because I’d amazed the coach, I should be in Cameroon because there were still the [African] Champions League matches to play. The idea was that I would play well, the papers would all be talking about me and that would raise the stakes.<sup>52</sup>

On his teammate’s advice but also in order to be able to play in the African Champion Club’s Cup<sup>53</sup> with his club, Beb returned to Cameroon to finish the season, in the great hope of returning to France the following season. Unfortunately his return was marred by an injury sustained in a preparatory match for the African Champions League. Beb recalls somewhat poignantly how AS Cannes therefore decided to opt instead for another player from the national team:

To replace me they used another player, a midfielder, the most combative of the Indomitable Lions. They replaced me. They took him and that’s how I lost. He went to AS Cannes and had a great career there. I was in Europe, at AS Cannes, in Nice [...] why did I go back home?<sup>54</sup>

Torn between the desire for a professional career in France and the desire to play in the major competitions with his Cameroonian club, Beb still regrets the choice he made on the advice of his fellow Cameroonian.

### **Allegiance to the national team**

Beb's story shows the extent to which in the 1980s African footballers still felt very tied to their home countries. As they were not always fully recognized in footballing terms in France, taking part in competitions back home, usually with the national team, became crucially important for them. At the same time, however, that very allegiance to the home country threatened their position in their French club, largely because of the increased workload and hence the increased risk of injury.

That visceral bond tying Algerian players to their national team partly explains why they found it difficult to make a lasting place for themselves in their clubs. In theory, their professional clubs were obliged to release them to play for Algeria. But the fact was that those absences were not well regarded by their clubs, especially as they were frequent.<sup>55</sup> The Algerian players were torn between their national team and the wish to abide by their commitment to the professional club paying them and for whom they had dreamed of playing. Despite certain qualms, however, they tended to opt for the national team. They frequently chose to play for the Fennecs wishing to avoid sanctions, to show their dedication to their homeland, to spread their prestige in Algeria and in the Algerian community all over Europe, in order to maximize their chances to participate in the 1986 World Cup in Mexico.<sup>56</sup>

During the 1985–6 season, for example, when Le Havre AC were in the first division, Tedj Bensaoula was suspended for three weeks by his club when he had been called upon to play in a return match between Algeria and Tunisia.

I have a special clause in my contract and I asked the HAC bosses to respect it. But they didn't want to. I therefore decided to leave, legally, for Algiers, because I'd been summoned by the FAF. The HAC bosses decided to suspend my contract. As far as I was concerned then, I couldn't go back. I waited for them to amend their decision, which they did eventually'.<sup>57</sup>

The intensive level of involvement in the various Algerian national teams explains why players had so many chronic and relatively early injuries. Bensaoula added:

After the [Sport] Reform,<sup>58</sup> I spent a lot more time at my club and in the national team than at home. We were training all the time, we'd go on tour in Africa, Europe, America, Asia, the Middle East. I was saturated: club, civil national team, military national team, between 1978 and 1980. I was only 26 years old and I was exhausted, worn out.<sup>59</sup>

For his part, the Mulhouse player Salah Assad had a persistent knee pain. He suffered ‘six fissures au cartilage’ [six cartilage tears], which required several operations. This had a significant psychological effect and considerably slowed down his football career, eventually bringing it to an end after the Mexico World Cup in 1986:

I went home to Algiers with an injured knee. My mind, my morale, were also injured. As far as I was concerned it was over. I had at least six or seven operations. I had given up, it was awful. And then for the first time I grew scared that I would lose my knee. So I stopped.<sup>60</sup>

M’Fédé too probably owes his dismissal from Stade Rennais in part to his absences when called to play for the national team, but also to his state of health when he would return to play for the club after a tour with the Indomitable Lions. He explained why in 1987 he felt obliged to go back to Cameroon because he was dismissed during the winter truce, and could not apply for other clubs, as this was only possible for unemployed players. Having played in Rennes, he was not transferable to any other clubs. Thus, he had to return to Cameroon.<sup>61</sup>

He seemed aware that Stade Rennais were infuriated by his repeated injuries sustained during Cameroon international matches. The first major injury was during an Afro-Asian Cup match in the early 1980s: ‘I damaged my knee, a huge sprain. I didn’t play for three months and they tossed me out like some old packaging. None of the Cameroon bosses took me back to Rennes to say “Look, he’s had an accident”’.<sup>62</sup>

M’Fédé regrets that the management of his national team were not more involved; he is critical of them for not going back with him and taking the time to explain the reasons for this injury. M’Fédé injured his knee a second time, during the 1986 Africa Cup of Nations, although his club had not authorized him to take part:

When Claude Leroy, our trainer, came to me at the time he said “Look, I’ve spoken to Pierre Mosca [the trainer at Stade Rennais between 1984 and 1987] and he said you have some big matches”. We had Monaco, Paris and I think Auxerre at the time. “He says he doesn’t want to release you”. So I took my things and went off without the club’s permission. So that was the second time I came back injured. And they continued to pay my wages. That was probably a bit much for them.<sup>63</sup>

While M’Fédé acknowledges the part he played in the events leading up to his dismissal from Rennes, he does not regret the choices he made. After all, by preferring to invest his effort with the Cameroon team, M’Fédé earned a position in a team that enjoyed

resounding success in the 1990 World Cup. After this competition, Mfédé tried at all costs to move back again to Europe. Recruited by a Spanish club from the second division, UE Figueres, he found it hard to stand out. After moving back to Cameroon, he finally tried his luck a last time in Indonesia in 1996, but without any success.

Examples like the Algerian Tedj Bensaoula and the Cameroonian Louis-Paul Mfédé are only a few of the numerous discussions and negotiations that took place between European clubs and the African national associations, around the participation of African players in the competitions of their national teams.<sup>64</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This study is part of broader research that has contributed to identifying the factors explaining the growing appeal of European clubs for African footballers in the early 1980s. Our aim was to complement that work by focusing on the experiences of that first generation of African footballers through the testimonies of players who came to Europe in the hope of forging a professional career.

Our work tried to delineate an important gap between the attractiveness of the European clubs for the African players given their good performance in their national team, and all the difficulties which the same players shared when coming to Europe to play football and seek integration, from the 1980s. Although working conditions in France seemed advantageous as far as salaries were concerned, they did not guarantee sporting or social satisfaction for players. Despite the international status of the players studied here, their careers in France were short and not always sweet. Both Cameroonians and Algerians had a mixed reception in France, if the racism they experienced is anything to go by. Despite the kindness (and occasional indulgence) of certain club bosses on their arrival, the players found that most of their moral and professional support came from fellow countrymen already playing with the French clubs. Until the existence of players' agents, these compatriots often acted as intermediaries with the clubs, albeit with very limited powers. And the players' allegiance to the national teams and the injuries they suffered from playing in so many matches often led to conflicts with their clubs, which sometimes threatened their careers in France.

Nevertheless, even if those experiences were often painful, they had no dissuasive effect on future generations. On the contrary, in the context of the economic crisis in Africa from the end of the 1980s, and given the opening of the borders of the European football

market, the career trajectories of older ‘brothers’ served as milestones for a younger generation, in a search for ‘new social figures of success’.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to the CIES Observatory 566 players from thirty-one African countries are playing in the thirty-one first division around Europe (CIES Observatory, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Among the most recent statutory modifications, the passage of the ‘3+2’ rule at the end of the 1980s, which authorized clubs to have in their team three foreign players at the same time, to whom could be added two players under continuous contract to a club from the same country for at least five years. In 1995, the Bosman case, by putting an end to the limitation on the recruitment of ‘European’ players, also benefited the African players, as it stopped some concurrence between the two categories around the ‘3+2’ rule. Finally, the ‘Malaja’ case in 2002 opened the market further, by extending the concept of ‘free circulation’ of sportsmen and women to all the countries, which signed agreements of cooperation or association with the European Union.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Lanfranchi and Matthew Taylor, *Moving with the Ball. The Migration of Professional Footballers* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 183; Frenkiel Stanislas, ‘Migratory Networks used by Algerian Professional Footballers in France: From Colonial Times to the Postcolonial Era (1932–1991)’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 32/7 (2015), 952–964.

<sup>4</sup> Stanislas Frenkiel, *Une histoire des agents sportifs en France. Les imprésarios du football (1979–2014)* (Neuchâtel: Editions du CIES, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Freely translated from French. Raffaele Poli, ‘L’importation des footballeurs en France (1960–2005)’, in Claude Boli, Yvan Gastaut and Fabrice Grognet, eds, *Allez la France! Football et immigration* (Paris: Gallimard/MNS/CNHI, 2010), 65.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Dietschy, ‘Histoire des premières migrations de joueurs africains en Europe. Entre assimilation, affirmation et déracinement’, *Afrique Contemporaine*, 133 (2010), 36.

<sup>7</sup> Lanfranchi and Taylor, *Moving with the Ball*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>9</sup> Stanislas Frenkiel, ‘La permanence de la condition d’immigré sportif africain: une socio-histoire des footballeurs professionnels camerounais en France (1954–2010)’, *Histoire Sociale / Social History* 14/90 (2012), 255–280.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Wahl and Pierre Lanfranchi, *Les footballeurs professionnels des années 1930 à nos jours* (Paris: Hachette, 1995), 290.

<sup>11</sup> Raffaele Poli, *Les migrations internationales des footballeurs - Trajectoires de joueurs camerounais en Suisse* (Neuchâtel: CIES, 2004), 157.

<sup>12</sup> Jérôme Berthoud and Raffaele Poli, ‘L’après-carrière des footballeurs professionnels en Afrique du Sud’, *Staps* 4/94 (2011), 25–38.

<sup>13</sup> Interviews conducted as part of the thesis currently being written by Jérôme Berthoud on the paths followed by Cameroon players after their retirement from football (Institut des sciences du sport de l’Université de Lausanne).

<sup>14</sup> Interviews conducted as part of the PhD thesis by Stanislas Frenkiel, ‘Des footballeurs professionnels algériens entre deux rives – Travailler en France, jouer pour l’Algérie (1954–2002)’ (Université Paris-Sud, U.F.R S.T.A.P.S, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Lanfranchi and Taylor, *Moving with the Ball*, 184.

<sup>16</sup> Raffaele Poli and Paul Dietschy, ‘Le football africain entre immobilisme et extraversion’, *Politique africaine* 102 (2006), 173–187.

<sup>17</sup> Yvan Gastaut, ‘Algérie-Allemagne, la victoire des héritiers du “Onze de l’Indépendance” lors de la Coupe du Monde 1982’, in Paul Dietschy, Yvan Gastaut and Stéphane Mourlane, *Histoire politique des Coupes du Monde de football* (Paris: Vuibert, 2006), 295–310.

<sup>18</sup> Freely translated from French. Paul Dietschy and David-Claude Kemo-Keimbo, *L’Afrique et la planète football* (Paris: EPA Editions, 2008), 144.

<sup>19</sup> Writing about Salah Assad, the journalist Hédi Hamel noted in *La Semaine de l’Emigration* of 10 February 1983 that ‘the Algerian team’s exploits in Spain merely confirmed the talents of this sophisticated player with world class technical skills, both an outstanding dribbler and a clever striker. His transfer to France for a high fee did not go unnoticed.’ Freely translated from French. *La Semaine de l’Emigration*, 10 February 1983, 18–19.

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- <sup>20</sup> Interview with Ali Bencheikh, 1 August 2006.
- <sup>21</sup> Interview with Djamel Tlemçani, 11 November 2006.
- <sup>22</sup> Interview with Nasser Oughlis, 28 November 2007.
- <sup>23</sup> In other words, the ‘flip flap’, or ‘elastico’, a technique that involves using the outside of the foot then the inside in quick succession to fool the other player.
- <sup>24</sup> ‘Saison hachée’. Interview with Tedj Bensaoula, 18 August 2006.
- <sup>25</sup> Stade Rennais online, accessed on 27 July 2015.
- <sup>26</sup> Changed its name to VAFC (Valenciennes Football Club) in 1996.
- <sup>27</sup> Interview with Roger Milla, 31 July 2014.
- <sup>28</sup> ‘Tout le monde était professionnel. C’est peut-être parce que je venais d’arriver ou que j’étais africain que j’avais les 3000 [francs français] mais il y’avait quand même les joueurs qui avaient 15 000 et 20 000, 25 000 et autres’. Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Algeria won the Mediterranean Games in 1975, the African Games and the Youth African Nations Championship in 1978. It also qualified for the quarter final of the Youth World Cup in 1979 and came fourth at the Mediterranean Games in Split (1979). In 1980, the team went to the final of the African Nations Championship in Lagos and participated in the quarter final at the Olympic Games in Moscow.
- <sup>30</sup> ‘J’ai logé pendant un mois à l’hôtel Sofitel. Puis, le club m’a trouvé une belle maison avec ma femme dans un petit village qui m’a tout de suite ouvert les bras. Le maire a donné une petite réception en mon honneur à la mairie. C’est gentil. Les gens m’aimaient bien’. Interview with Salah Assad, 25 July 2006.
- <sup>31</sup> Interview with Rabah Madjer, 27 July 2006.
- <sup>32</sup> ‘Ne pas avoir été dépaycé. Il y a beaucoup d’Algériens et de Français qui ont vécu en Algérie avant l’Indépendance’. Interview with Mahmoud Guendouz, 25 July 2006.
- <sup>33</sup> ‘Reçu un très bon accueil, logé dans un appartement avec la voiture et les billets d’avion’. Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> ‘C’était dur au début. Notamment sur le plan climatique. Ça changeait du tout au tout. Ça flotte souvent, le verglas, les usines, le crachin, les nuages ou la neige. Il fallait gérer tout ça. Il fallait gérer aussi le changement de mentalité. C’est le professionnalisme, la rigueur, pas de sentiments. Il m’est arrivé de me demander ce que je faisais là.’ Interview with Tedj Bensaoula, 18 August 2006.
- <sup>35</sup> Jean-Michel Faure and Charles Suaud, ‘Un professionnalisme inachevé. Deux états du champ du football professionnel en France’, *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 103 (1994), 7–26.
- <sup>36</sup> ‘Le dimanche après-midi par exemple, la visite des sites touristiques tels qu’Etretat, Fécamp, Deauville, Honfleur [...] Et puis le cinéma. Il m’est aussi arrivé de me déplacer jusqu’à Paris pour aller voir Coluche ou un bon groupe de rock ou de reggae’. Interview with Tedj Bensaoula, 18 August 2006.
- <sup>37</sup> ‘Avec le temps, on s’efforce de s’adapter. De toute façon, nous n’avons pas le choix. Il faut s’adapter’. Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> Stanislas Frenkiel, ‘Les footballeurs du FLN: des patriotes entre deux rives’, *Migrations et Société* 110 (2007), 121–139.
- <sup>39</sup> ‘Ce que je sais c’est que j’ai trouvé une famille. Une famille parce que j’ai trouvé d’abord un président très généreux. Un président qui comprenait et qui savait lire le football. J’ai trouvé des coéquipiers qui n’avaient pas mon âge, qui étaient jeunes, plus que moi, avec qui nous avons vraiment formé un groupe. Et à partir de là ça nous a permis pendant trois ans de faire des merveilles dans ce club. C’était vraiment un club famille’. Interview with Roger Milla, 31 July 2014.
- <sup>40</sup> ‘Ils m’ont seulement encouragé parce que moi je disais que c’était fermé. Et je disais que la manière qu’avaient les gens là-bas ne m’incitait pas à y aller et c’est eux qui m’ont convaincu. Ils pensaient que j’avais la mentalité pour discuter avec les présidents et ne pas subir ce que d’autres auraient pu subir’. Interview with Joseph-Antoine Bell, 17 August 2012.
- <sup>41</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Guendouz, 25 July 2006.
- <sup>42</sup> ‘Des lettres et des coups de fil de menaces. [...] C’était des hooligans et on était surveillé par la police avec l’autre attaquant marocain Merry Krimau’. Interview with Tedj Bensaoula, 18 August 2006.
- <sup>43</sup> ‘La meilleure des réponses que tu puisses donner à ces gens-là c’est sur le terrain. Moi j’en ai été victime. Quand je touchais le ballon, les gens ils étaient là, comme des singes ‘ouh, ouh’. Ils

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balançaient des bananes. A la fin c'est moi qui marque le but, on gagne 1-0. Ça c'est la meilleure réponse'. Interview with Louis-Paul M'Fédé, 9 August 2012.

<sup>44</sup> 'A ce moment-là, il y avait un comportement raciste, un racisme culturel, c'est-à-dire les gens ne faisaient pas exprès. Quand je m'entraînais au Matra, ils disaient ne jamais avoir vu un gardien aussi fort mais ils ne m'ont quand même pas recruté. Et à côté de ça, ils disaient qu'ils n'avaient jamais vu un gardien noir, qu'un noir ne pouvait pas être gardien. Donc ce racisme là faisait qu'on ne m'avait pas recruté. Or s'ils m'avaient pris, peut-être que je n'aurais pas eu la même carrière, je ne sais pas. Mais toujours est-il que s'ils m'avaient pris, j'aurais été à l'école et au foot et donc du coup, je n'aurais pas été en Côte d'Ivoire'. Interview with Joseph-Antoine Bell, 17 August 2012.

<sup>45</sup> 'Quand je suis arrivé à Marseille, je peux dire que j'étais effectivement ce que les Marseillais n'attendaient pas. C'est-à-dire que j'étais beaucoup plus fort qu'ils ne l'auraient imaginé et que tant mieux, puisque le racisme que j'ai vécu au départ, qui était un racisme culturel, n'avait pas disparu. Il était là. Donc le président qui m'a engagé prenait un gros risque. Et tout le monde se serait bien foutu de la gueule des Marseillais si moi je n'avais pas été bon. D'ailleurs on se moquait d'eux au début quand on ne m'avait pas vu jouer'. Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Vincent Latour, *Le Royaume-Uni et la France au test de l'immigration et à l'épreuve de l'intégration, 1930–2012* (Bordeaux: Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, 2014), 166; Sophie Bouly de Lesdain, 'Migration camerounaise et emploi. L'impact du projet migratoire étudiant sur la situation des camerounaises face à l'emploi', *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales* 15/2 (1999), 189–202.

<sup>47</sup> 'Remonter le moral'. Interview with Tedj Bensaoula, 18 August 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Rabah Madjer, 27 July 2006.

<sup>49</sup> 'C'était un amateur dans l'âme, Madjer. C'était un grand joueur mais il ne savait pas préparer un match. La veille du match, il allait au ciné, n'importe quoi. C'était pas un 'pro'. Nous, on avait appris notre métier depuis dix-sept ans, on était dans le milieu. On lui a mis le pied à l'étrier'. Interview with Fathi Chebel, 3 December 2007.

<sup>50</sup> 'Mais bien sûr, il suffisait d'un coup de fil'. Interview with Jean-Claude Djengué, 8 May 2012.

<sup>51</sup> 'C'est après cette déception c'est-à-dire ne pouvant pas vraiment avoir cette voie royale par rapport à quelqu'un, une éminente personne comme Roger Milla, que je me suis dit 'à quoi bon alors?' Autant rentrer'. Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> 'Donc lui à la fin de l'entraînement, il prend le véhicule, on rentre à Nice parce nous étions à Nice. Dans le métro, il me donne donc les conseils de ne plus rester là. Comme j'ai émerveillé le coach, il faut que je sois au Cameroun parce que j'ai encore les matchs de la prochaine Champions League [africaine]. Que je joue bien et que les journaux parleront de moi, comme ça on montera les enchères'. Interview with Pierre Ismaël Beb, 20 August 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Initiated in 1964–5 on a 'home and away' basis, it was dominated by Sub-Saharan clubs during the first years. At the end of the 1970s, Cameroonian clubs won it three times in a row (Canon de Yaoundé in 1978 and 1980, Union de Douala in 1979), before other clubs – from the north of the continent – came to assert their domination. In 1997, the competition was renamed the CAF Champions League and integrated into a 'group phase' as in Europe in the European Champions League.

<sup>54</sup> 'Pour me remplacer, on a pris un autre joueur. C'était un milieu de terrain, le plus combatif des Lions Indomptables. Il m'a remplacé. Ils l'ont pris et c'est comme ça que j'ai perdu. Il est parti à l'AS Cannes, où il a fait une très bonne carrière. J'étais en Europe, à l'AS Cannes, à Nice, qu'est-ce-que je suis revenu faire?' Interview with Pierre Ismaël Beb, 20 August 2012.

<sup>55</sup> According to our calculations, in all competitions between 1982 and 1986, the national Algerian team played seventy-four friendly and official matches, averaging eighteen per season. Ten years earlier, between 1972 and 1976, the average was 15.5.

<sup>56</sup> With twelve professional players in a team of twenty-two, Algeria was eliminated in the group phase after a draw against Northern Ireland (1-1) and two defeats against Brazil (1-0) and Spain (3-0).

<sup>57</sup> 'J'ai une clause spéciale dans mon contrat et j'ai demandé aux dirigeants du HAC de la respecter. Ils n'ont pas voulu le faire. J'ai alors décidé de partir légalement à Alger puisque j'avais été convoqué par la FAF. Les dirigeants du HAC ont décidé de suspendre mon contrat. Pour moi, alors, il n'était pas



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question de revenir. J'ai attendu qu'ils modifient leurs décisions, ce qu'ils ont fait finalement'. Interview with Tedj Bensaoula, 18 August 2006.

<sup>58</sup> With professional sport being vehemently denounced as setting the worst possible example to young people, on 27 June 1977 the Council of Ministers decided to dissolve all the civil clubs and replace them with ASPs ('associations sportives de performance'). These ASPs were run by socialist companies, the only sector with significant resources (equipment, management, transport and taking responsibility for the athletes [...]). It was an act of nationalization and strengthening of the public sectors. Freely translated from French. Youssef Fatès, 'Sport et politique en Algérie. De la période coloniale à nos jours' (Thesis, Paris I, 2002), 667.

<sup>59</sup> 'Avec la Réforme, je passais beaucoup plus de temps par exemple dans mon club, en équipe nationale que chez moi. On s'entraînait tout le temps, on faisait des sorties en Afrique, en Europe, en Amérique, en Asie, au Moyen-Orient. J'étais saturé: club, équipe nationale civile et militaire de 1978 à 1980. À 26 ans, j'étais épuisé, lessivé.' Interview with Tedj Bensaoula, 18 August 2006.

<sup>60</sup> 'Je rentre à Alger avec le genou blessé. Ma tête, mon moral aussi était blessé. Pour moi, c'était fini. Je me suis fait opérer plus de six, sept fois. J'ai baissé les bras, c'était atroce. Et puis, pour la première fois, j'ai commencé à avoir peur de perdre mon genou. J'ai arrêté'. Interview with Salah Assad, 25 July 2006.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Louis-Paul M'Fédé, 9 August 2012.

<sup>62</sup> 'Je me fais mal au genou, une grosse entorse. Je reste trois mois sans jouer et ils m'ont balancé comme un colis. Il n'y avait aucun dirigeant camerounais pour me ramener à Rennes et dire "Voilà, il lui est arrivé un accident'. Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> 'Quand Claude Leroy, qui était notre entraîneur, vient à l'époque, il me dit simplement que voilà, il a discuté avec Pierre Mosca [entraîneur du Stade Rennais entre 1984 et 1987]: 'Il dit que vous avez des matchs importants.' On avait Monaco, Paris je crois Auxerre à cette période-là. 'Il dit qu'il ne veut pas te libérer.' Donc moi je prends mes affaires et je m'en vais sans autorisation du club. Donc ça faisait déjà deux fois que je revenais blessé. Et c'est eux qui continuent à prendre en charge mon salaire. C'était le trop plein là'. Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> In January 2015, just before the thirtieth edition of the African Nations Championship, the former president of the French club of Marseille, Pape Diouf, rebelled against the methods of the European clubs which refused to release their African players for the competition, in an editorial published in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, mentioning a 'duty of solidarity with African football.' *LeMonde.fr*, 19 January 2015 (consulted 23 November 2015).

<sup>65</sup> See notably: Richard Banégas and Jean-Pierre Warnier, 'Nouvelles figures de la réussite et du pouvoir en Afrique', *Politique africaine* 2/82 (2001), 5–23.