

Making stars and making nations? Migration of football talents and the contribution of fans to national identities

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The phenomenon of the migration of African football players to Europe and the contribution of Ghanaian supporters at the World Cup to a national identity are two research questions of “Footballmigration – A Dream of Europe”, a research project by Erdmute Alber, professor for Social Anthropology, and her assistant Christian Ungruhe. Their research takes place within the framework of the Bavarian research network “Migration and Knowledge” (formig) funded by the Bavarian State Ministry of Sciences, Research and the Arts from 2009-2012.

Their project aims to qualify recent debates on the practices of the movement of young African players to Europe which portray this phenomenon merely as an exploitation of talents and thus tend to victimize them without taking their agency into account. Since the liberation of the European labour market in professional football during the mid-nineties, playing football has provided young Africans with a growing possibility of going to Europe in order to achieve a better standard of living. Although only a few actually make it to the top, the dream of Europe is ubiquitous among all young talents. Whereas players on lower levels often face racist insults and are perceived as alleged victims of human trafficking, professional footballers are stars and icons of their clubs. However, preliminary results of biographical interviews with players in German professional and amateur leagues, expert interviews with soccer agents, coaches and football functionaries as well as participant observation among young talents in Ghanaian soccer academies indicate that players have to be seen as agents in the process of migration and transfer to a European club whether they achieve a professional or amateur level. A star/victim dichotomy does not picture the reality of strategies but locks migrants into stereotyping categories according to their level of benefit for the host society.

A side project led the anthropologists to the first World cup on African soil in South Africa in order to evaluate the contribution of states and football fans to the construction of a national

identity. They met some members of a group of approximately 1.400 Ghanaian supporters who were sponsored by their government to cheer for their national team. The Ghanaian government wanted to make sure that a sufficient number of fans would support the team and be worthy representatives of Ghana. Whereas the supporters did a good job in the stadiums and presented themselves as “celebrating Africans” to the world, the background of this story is one of contradicting interests, corruption, rumors and even violence. Behind the colourful curtain of waving flags fans and the state were at work in order to fulfill the task of creating a good image of Ghana to the world as well as a self-assurance as a nation.

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