

#### **Abstract**

History has often neglected the study of Sport as an element in State identity, something that is detrimental to historical inquiry. The goal of this paper is to consider Sport within a larger socio-political context and thereby examine how Sport can be utilised in State identity formation. It will be argued that Zairian Dictator, Joseph Mobutu, utilised Sport at a critical juncture in that State's history and used it to help foster a Zairian identity, both internally and internationally. The paper will firstly examine the background to Mobutu's reign and the challenges facing Mobutu in 1965. Following this, Mobutu's initial forays into Sport as a tool for internal identity formation will be examined before bolder steps taken by Mobutu post-1970 are considered. Having examined the case of Sport assisting internal identity formation, the paper will examine how Sport was used for international identity formation, with special reference to the Heavyweight Boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman held in Zaire in 1974 and the Zairian football team's experience at the 1974 World Cup. Finally, the paper will evaluate the success of Mobutu's efforts.

### **Key Words**

Zairian History, Sport, Identity Formation, Africa, Joseph Mobutu

### More than a game? Mobutu, Sport and Zairian Identity, 1965-1974.

"In Zaire, we do not consider sport as a mere amusement, but as a socio-cultural political phenomenon". 1

M.P.R. Minutes 1975

History has often neglected the study of Sport as an element in State identity, something that is detrimental to historical inquiry. The goal of this paper is to consider Sport within a larger socio-political context and thereby examine how Sport can be utilised in State identity formation. It will be argued that Zairian Dictator, Joseph Mobutu, utilised Sport at a critical juncture in that State's history and used it to help foster a Zairian identity, both internally and internationally. The paper will firstly examine the background to Mobutu's reign and the challenges facing Mobutu in 1965. Following this, Mobutu's initial forays into Sport as a tool for internal identity formation will be examined before bolder steps taken by Mobutu post-1970 are considered. Having examined the case of Sport assisting internal identity formation, the paper will examine how Sport was used for international identity formation, with special reference to the Heavyweight Boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman held in Zaire in 1974 and the Zairian football team's experience at the 1974 World Cup. Finally, the paper will evaluate the success of Mobutu's efforts.

When Mobutu seized power in 1965, Congo, as it was then known, was in a state of turmoil. Following independence from Belgium in 1960 the newly autonomous Congo endured a series of political crises: the death of its first Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba in 1961, an attempted secession by Katanga in 1960, one of its wealthier

<sup>1</sup> Hoover Institute, *Discours du President de la Republique du Zaire Devant le Conseil Legislatif*, Le 4 Janvier 1975, M.P.R., 4 January 1975.

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regions, and the seizure of State power in 1965 by a US and Belgian backed army led by Mobutu.<sup>2</sup> Coupled with this political turmoil, Congo was widely perceived at this juncture to be ethnically diverse. Minutes from the *Mouvement Populaire de la Revolution* (M.P.R.), the sole political party established under Mobutu, alleged that the Congo had 400 ethnic groups with almost as many dialects when Mobutu seized power in 1965.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Congo's internal identity was in many ways in a state of flux. Congo's international identity had also been affected. Mobutu's and Congo's reputations were tarnished in the West by Mobutu's decision to publically hang four former cabinet ministers six months before he took office.<sup>4</sup> Mobutu famously told reporters following the execution that "we are Bantu" meaning that Africa and Europe could not be compared.<sup>5</sup> American involvement in Mobutu's seizure of power had also raised questions over Mobutu's legitimacy to rule.<sup>6</sup>

What was Mobutu's key aim following his seizure of power? Mobutu's primary goal in his first five years of leadership appears to have been consolidation and expansion of his own political power. Yet coupled with this appears to have been a desire to gain global recognition of Congo's sovereignty, to create a united Congolese identity and to aggrandize Mobutu as a strong leader. With these goals in mind, this paper will

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Chrysantus Ayangafac, 'Political economy of Regionalisation in Central Africa', *Institute for Security Studies Monographs*, 155 (2008), 22. The Congo at this time was seemingly and for many decades after a Cold War concern for the USA, with Mobutu often receiving millions in aid from the US. Michela Wrong, 'The Emperor Mobutu', *Transition*, 9/1 (2000), 96.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Hoover Institute, *Decisions du 30 Decembre 1974 Report*, M.P.R., 30 December 1974.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Howard W. French, 'Anatomy of an Autocracy: Mobutu's 32-Year Reign', *New York Times International*, 17 May 1997 (http://partners.nytimes.com/library/world/africa/051797zaire-mobutu.html) [accessed 2 February 2014].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Thierry Michel, *Mobutu: Roi du Zaire: Episode I* (Brussels, 1997), 29 minutes, 14 seconds.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Lewis A. Erenberg, 'Rumble in the Jungle': Muhammad Ali vs. George Foreman in the Age of Global Spectacle', *Journal of Sport History* 39/1 (2012), 84.

Ayangafac, 'Political economy of Regionalisation in Central Africa', 22.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> William Reno, 'Sovereignty and personal rule in Zaire', *African Studies Quarterly*, 1/3 (1997), 212.

examine the tentative steps taken by Mobutu from 1965-1970 to create an internal Congolese identity through Sport.

At first glance football may appear to have been an odd choice for Mobutu to pursue as a political tool. The game was brought to Congo by Belgian colonisers and had been introduced to the State primarily through the Belgian army. Yet Mobutu, himself a former goalkeeper, appeared to have been aware of the unifying power of Sport very early on. Open coming to power in 1965, Mobutu staged a friendly match with Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana to mark the birth of a new dawn for Congo. More symbolically, in 1966, following the renaming of 3 major colonial cities in the Congo, Mobutu changed the name of the Congo Football team from the 'Lions' to the 'Leopards', along with renaming Congolese football stadiums and club team names to reflect more 'traditional' African names. Jackson and Rosberg noted that this period could be characterised by Mobutu's attempts to decolonise Congo and to establish an African identity separate from Europe. The symbolism of renaming Congolese stadia, clubs and cities would surely fit into this characterisation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Paul Darby, 'Football, Colonial Doctrine and Indigenous Resistance: Mapping the Political Persona of FIFA's African Constituency', *Culture, Sport, Society*, 3/1 (2000), 86.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> 'Congo-Kinshasa: Inside Mobutu's Head And House - a New Look At a Former Dictator', *All Africa*, 2 Mar. 2007 (http://allafrica.com/stories/200703011200.html) [accessed 14 January 2014].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Kenneth Lee Adelman, 'The Recourse to Authenticity and Négritude in Zaire', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 13/1 (1975), 134.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Darby, *Africa, football, and FIFA: politics, colonialism, and resistance (Vol. 23)* (Oxen, 2002),

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Paul Darby, *Africa, football, and FIFA: politics, colonialism, and resistance (Vol. 23)* (Oxen, 2002), 27. Interestingly, Wrong has noted that Mobutu liked to be known as a Leopard and famously wore a Leopard Skin Hat. Thus the changing of the team name to Leopards may have been very important in symbolically associating the team with Mobutu. Wrong wrote that for Mobutu the Leopard signified authority and power, both of which he was to exert over the soccer team (Michela Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo* (New York, 2001), 4). <sup>13</sup> Robert H. Jackson, and Carl Gustav Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant* (Berkeley, 1982), 172.

Mobutu was willing to pay for this symbolism. In 1966, Mobutu proudly declared, "Sport is just as important as the economy" and he certainly treated Congolese soccer as an economic investment, providing large funds for the repatriation of Congolese footballers playing in Belgium. <sup>14</sup> Congolese players had established themselves in Belgium from the late 1950s, when Léon Mokuna became the first regular player with AA Gent. It was highly symbolic for Mobutu to have these players, known at the time as *belgafricain*, return to the independent Congo. <sup>15</sup> Indeed, according to internal Congolese Football Association documents, Mobutu was the driving force behind this repatriation, the cost of which was high. <sup>16</sup> In 1967, the Congolese FA agreed to pay over 950,000 Belgian Francs for the return of four Congolese players plying their trade in Belgium. <sup>17</sup> Yet the investment did not stop here. In 1968 alone, Mobutu invested heavily in Congolese club football, improved training facilities and even sponsored a friendly between the Congolese football team (the 'Leopards') and a Santos team featuring the legendary Pelé. <sup>18</sup>

The dividends from such investments were high. In 1968, the Leopards won the African Cup of Nations in Ethiopia. Mobutu utilised this victory almost immediately. Upon returning to Congo, each player emerged from the airplane wearing the Leopard skin

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Paul Dietschy, 'Football Imagery and Colonial Legacy: Zaire's Disastrous Campaign During the 1974 World Cup', *Soccer & Society*, 13/2 (2012), 226.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> FIFA Archives, 'Correspondence series with national associations, Zaire dossier, letter from Helmut Käser, to the Congolese Federation', 7 March 1967.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> FIFA Archives, 'Pour Renforcer son Equip Nationale le Congo-Leo Rappelle ses Footballeurs Operant en Belgique', Zaire Dossier, 1967.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. It is interesting to the note that the Congolese Federation never actually paid for these transfers as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Ibid. It is interesting to the note that the Congolese Federation never actually paid for these transfers as correspondence from Käser to the Congolese Federation indicates late and unpaid payments. FIFA Archives, 'Correspondence series with national associations, Zaire dossier, letter from Helmut Käser, to the Congolese Federation', 20 March 1968 and 9 July 1968.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Laurent Dubois, 'Soccer Politics / The Politics of Football', *Duke University*, (http://sites.duke.edu/wcwp/research-projects/africa/the-politics-of-african-soccer/zaire/#\_ftn1) [accessed 4 February 2014].

cap made famous by Mobutu, photos emerged in the national newspaper *Salongo* of Mobutu greeting the players and Mobutu even presented medals to the victorious team. <sup>19</sup> As Congolese film directors Phoba and Muya, would later argue, strong ties between Mobutu and the Leopards were established at this time. <sup>20</sup> Indeed, Congolese banknotes in 1970 had a picture of Mobutu side by side with Kinshasa Stadium, the stadium of the Leopards. <sup>21</sup> Coupled with the Leopards's success, Congolese club teams won the African Champions Cup in 1969 and 1970.

What was the effect of such success on identity formation within Congo? Scholars appear to have only recently identified the positive relationship between football and nationhood, yet journalists were aware of this in the Congo in the late 1960s. African journalist, Faouzi Mahjoub wrote in 1968 of the great nationalist fervour exuding from the Congolese football team and its supporters. Members of voluntary organizations in Congo would later write of this time that under Mobutu, regional division in the Congo, at least initially, began to fade. Football seems to have played a role in creating an internal Congolese identity that was separate from its colonial past, facilitated unity and, perhaps more importantly for Mobutu, helped present him in a positive light to his citizens.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Ian Hawkey, Feet of the Chameleon (London, 2009), 87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Monique Mbeka Phoba and Guy Kabeya Muya, *Entre le Coupe et L'election* (New York, 2008), 12 minutes 7 seconds.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup>Banknotes (http://www.banknotes.com/CD9.JPG) [first accessed 24 February 2014]. See Appendix. <sup>22</sup> See for example Bea Vidacs, 'Banal Nationalism, Football, and Discourse Community in Africa', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 11/1 (2011), 25-41. Frank J. Lechner, 'Imagined Communities in the Global Game: Soccer and the Development of Dutch National Identity', Global Networks, 7/2 (2007), 215-229. Stéphane Mourlane, 'Italy, World Football Champion 1982: A New Risorgimento?', *Social History*, 45/2 (2012), 245-253.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Dietschy, 'Football Imagery and Colonial Legacy: Zaire's Disastrous Campaign During the 1974 World Cup', 225.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Mats Svensson, 'Yesterday Communists, Today Islamists, Tomorrow We Fight?', *Foreign Policy Journal*, 27 March 2011, (http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2011/03/27/yesterday-communists-today-islamists-tomorrow-we-fight/) [accessed 4 January 2014].

As Congo's economic and Mobutu's political situation began to improve, Mobutu used sport much more dynamically in the early 1970s. In this period, attempts appear to have been made by Mobutu to establish a Congolese internal identity centred on Mobutu himself. Following the declaration of a government policy of authenticité in 1971 Mobutu and his M.P.R. changed the name of the country from Congo to Zaire. Zairians, as they were to be known, were obliged to change their Western names to African ones, drop titles like Mr. and Mrs. in favour of 'citizen' and abandon European dress for tunics for men and wraps of printed cloth for women.<sup>25</sup> Mobutu even 'Africanized' his own name in 1972.<sup>26</sup> According to Barker, this was Mobutu's own Cultural Revolution, aimed at promoting a traditional African identity.<sup>27</sup> The programme of authenticité affected Zairian football. Footballers were redefined as 'national treasures' and their freedom to play for foreign teams abroad became unthinkable. In 1972 Mobutu proclaimed "Zaire must not become the cradle in Africa for Europe's mercenaries". 28 Mobutu personally informed players considering playing football outside of Zaire that this was impossible.<sup>29</sup> Football stadiums were once more renamed in 1973, with three of the stadiums named after Mobutu. 30 Investment was still directed towards Zairian football, and thanks to the national newspaper and Mobutu mouthpiece, Salongo, which

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> French, 'Anatomy of an Autocracy: Mobutu's 32-Year Reign'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Mobutu changed his name from Joseph-Desiré Mobutu to Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa Za Banga or 'The all-conquering warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake' (Ibid.).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Jonathon Barker, 'Zaire 1974', *When Saturday Comes*, 25 February 2008, (http://www.wsc.co.uk/the-archive/37-As-good-as-it-got/4563-zaire-1974) [accessed 2 January 2014].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Hawkey, Feet of the Chameleon, 87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> FIFA Archives, 'Le Zaire qualifie pour le tornai final , Zaire Dossier, 1973. Interestingly two were renamed after Patrice Lumumba, the former Prime Minister of Congo, whom Mobutu had previously denounced. Mitchel has demonstrated how in the early 1970s Mobutu reinvented Lumumba's history to that of a patriot and began to align himself with Lumumba's legacy (Michel, *Mobutu: Roi du Zaire: Episode I*, 32 minutes 9 seconds).

in the 1970s was directing 50% of its content toward sport, it was made clear that Mobutu was the patron.<sup>31</sup>

Mobutu grew even bolder in his machinations following his policy of 'Zairianization' in 1973, which nationalised foreign companies operating in Zaire. Initial reports from scholars argued that citizens were happy that along with sport and society, business was also being 'authenticated'. 32 Yet Zairianization was coupled with a personality cult of 'Mobutuism' that emerged at the same time, which, according to Garner, quickly became farcical in its adoration.<sup>33</sup> A former prime minister of Mobutu's regime went as far as to claim "Nothing is possible in Zaire without Mobutu". 34 Nevertheless the attempts at an internal Zairian identity, created around Mobutu as a figurehead, were facilitated by sport in Zaire during this time. More and more publicity began to focus on Mobutu's seeming incredible financial power and his generosity.

It was during the early 1970s, when Zairian economic growth was reportedly at 7% a year, that Mobutu began a public policy of personal patronage to Sports stars, similar to the alleged patronage in other sectors of Mobutu's Zaire. 35 Following the Leopards historic qualification for the 1974 World Cup and their victory in the 1974 African Cup of Nations, Salongo proudly stated that Mobutu had given each player a house, a car and fifteen days vacation.<sup>36</sup> This was no mean feat, as many Zairians were struggling to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Dietschy, 'Football Imagery and Colonial Legacy: Zaire's Disastrous Campaign During the 1974 World Cup', 223.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Jackson and Rosberg, Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant, 172.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Phillip Garner, 'Congo and Korea: a study in divergence', *Journal of International Development*, 20/3 (2008), 327.
<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Wrong, 'The Emperor Mobutu', 94.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> 'Le chef de l'Etat a offert á chaque 'Lépard' une maison, une voiture et 15 jours de vacances', Salongo, December 10, 1973. The Leopards were the first Sub-Saharan African team to qualify for the World Cup.

survive at this time.<sup>37</sup> Mobutu even collected a soccer tax of 10 Zaires from each citizen to supposedly fund the Leopards.<sup>38</sup> What happened to this money or anyone who refused to pay, is unfortunately unknown.<sup>39</sup> Nor was this patronage confined to soccer. For the Heavyweight Boxing Match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, Mobutu made it known publically that he would give each athlete 5 million US Dollars. Mobutu even allegedly gave Foreman a baby lion cub upon his arrival in Zaire.<sup>40</sup> At times Mobutu was presented as a patron to Zaire as a whole. In 1974, prior to the Ali/Foreman fight in Kinshasa Stadium, banners were placed around Zairian streets that the fight was "a gift from the President to the Zairian people".<sup>41</sup> The fostering of a cult of personality around Mobutu at this time even extended to Zairian television showing Mobutu descending from the clouds to Zaire.<sup>42</sup>

Yet while Mobutu attempted to forge a Zairian identity around himself as a generous patriarchal figurehead, he also used Sport to demonstrate his own personal power. Following Zaire's troubled 1974 World Cup Campaign, when they lost 3 matches, conceded 14 goals and scored none, *Salongo* declared ominously that Mobutu had personally summoned the team to meet with him upon their return. Later reports suggested that the players had been imprisoned in Mobutu's compound for four days. During the World Cup itself, rumours emerged of Zairian Government interference with the Zairian football team, with messages such as 'win or die' allegedly being passed on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Garner, 'Congo and Korea: a study in divergence', 327.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Phoba and Muya, *Entre le Coupe et L'election*, 35 minutes 52 seconds.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Ibid., 36 minutes.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Erenberg, 'Rumble in the Jungle', 81.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Norman Mailer, *The Fight* (London, 1976), 22.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Martin Meredith, *The Fate of Africa: A History of 50 years of Independence* (New York, 2005), 297.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> 'La nuit des longs couteaux', Salongo, June 22, 1974

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Dietschy, 'Football Imagery and Colonial Legacy: Zaire's Disastrous Campaign During the 1974 World Cup', 236.

to the manager.<sup>45</sup> What effect this had on the team is unknown, but it is interesting to note that the FIFA technical report in 1974 remarked that Zaire seemed very nervous at the World Cup.<sup>46</sup> Mobutu engaged in other shows of strength as he attempted to demonstrate through sport that he was all-powerful. Prior to a Zairian Club match in 1974, Mobutu publically tried and imparted death sentences to several criminals in Kinshasa Stadium before a crowd of 30-40,000 people.<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, while efforts at identity formation through Sport from 1965 to 1970 appear to have largely focused on internal unity centred on Congo, the early 1970s were marked by Mobutu's attempts to establish an internal Zairian identity seemingly focused on Mobutu and not Zaire.

Internationally Mobutu's tactics for creating a Zairian identity differed from his internal efforts. Internationally he attempted to create a Zairian identity based on black power, global recognition of Zairian sovereignty and also depiction of Zaire as a country rich in resources with a trustworthy leader in Mobutu. His manifested itself in a number of interesting ways. Regarding football, Mobutu presented himself as the founder of the Congolese national team, the Leopards. Dupled with this, Mobutu presented himself as a great patron of football. On a trip to Cairo, in 1972, Mobutu promised to donate a large sum of money for the development of Egyptian soccer. Zairian football players also promoted Zaire's image abroad. In an interview with Shoot Magazine in 1974,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Jon Spurling, 'Mobutus Augen waren überall', *11Freunde* (http://www.11freunde.de/artikel/zaire-beider-wm-1974) [accessed 24 February 2014].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> FIFA, FIFA World Cup 1974 Final Competition – Technical Study (Zürich, 1974), 50.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Svensson, 'Yesterday Communists, Today Islamists, Tomorrow We Fight?'. Mobutu was to repeat this act again in 1977 (Alan Cowell, 'Zaire Head Makes Prisoners into Spectacle', *Daily News*, 22 April 1977).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Reno, William, 'Sovereignty and personal rule in Zaire', *African Studies Quarterly*, 1/3 (1997), 215. <sup>49</sup> Darby, 'Football, Colonial Doctrine and Indigenous Resistance: Mapping the Political Persona of FIFA's African Constituency', 68. This was true only if one discounted the national team established under Belgian colonial rule in 1919 that notionally ended in 1960.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> FIFA Archives, 'Le professionalisme préconisé par le 1er Congrés du M.P.R.' accompanying photograph and description, 1972.

Zaire's World Cup captain, Kidumu, joked that if Zaire won the World Cup, Mobutu may even give the players proceeds from one of Zaire's rich copper mines.<sup>51</sup>

Such was the desire to foster an identity of Zaire as a global nation that Mobutu paid for advertising hoardings at the World Cup in Germany in 1974 to display messages such as 'Zaire-Peace' and 'Go to Zaire', as evidenced in the following still from the Zaire-Yugoslavia Group match:



'Zaire-Peace' Advertising Hoarding from Zaire-Yugoslavia Group match, 18 June 1974 52

Yet while football was an important outlet for Mobutu, boxing in 1974 was arguably much more important for fostering an international image of Zaire. The 'Rumble in the Jungle' boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman gave Mobutu a chance to manipulate international opinion of Zaire in a way football simply could not. "The gladiators," noted the New York Times, "will serve as the most expensive public

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> 'Captain Series', *Shoot Magazine*, April 6<sup>th</sup> 1974.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Match available at Youtube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32ezaXJ3\_hQ) [accessed 20 February 2014]. Still taken from 13 minutes 49 seconds.

relations men in the history of world government." Muhammad Ali, reflecting on the fight in 1975 noted, "It was a rich black man who paid me and George Foreman, and he did it because he wanted some publicity for his little country... and he got it". Publicity was much needed for Zaire in some quarters. One writer for Ring Magazine sarcastically asked in 1974 "What, in heaven's name, is a Zaire?". In his quest for publicity, Mobutu spent 15 million US Dollars to refurbish Kinshasa stadium, build a new airport and improve Zairian infrastructure. One American television executive, perhaps cynically, noted "He converted a shithole into a first-class facility, a modern stadium that rivalled anything in a developed nation. And he did it in six months."

The heavyweight match gave Mobutu the opportunity to shape Zaire's international identity around ideas of Black Power and anti-colonialism. Atop Kinshasa stadium stood a 30x15-foot poster of Mobutu in leopard hat and scarf, symbols of his office.<sup>57</sup> Huge billboards hid squatter's shanties, proclaiming in French and English the regime's modernity and linking Africans and African Americans versus white supremacy.<sup>58</sup> One sign in Zaire proclaimed that "Black power is sought everywhere in the world, but it is realized here in Zaire".<sup>59</sup> Other billboards amplified the message. "A fight between two Blacks in a Black nation, organized by Blacks and seen by the whole world; that is a victory of Mobutuism."<sup>60</sup> Mobutu was careful not to promote Black Power to the detriment of US-Zairian relations and banned the production of one poster proclaiming

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Erenberg, 'Rumble in the Jungle', 90.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Paul Campbell, 'From the Vault: The Poetry of the Rumble in the Jungle', *The Guardian*, 30 October 2012 (http://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2012/oct/30/from-the-vault-poetry-rumble-in-jungle) [accessed 9 January 2014].

<sup>55</sup> Sam Tuab, 'What, in Heaven's name, is a Zaire?', Ring Magazine, July (1974), 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Leonard Gardner, 'Stopover in Caracas', Esquire Magazine (October 1974), 310.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Mailer, The Fight, 23.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Erenberg, 'Rumble in the Jungle', 90.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Jeff Levy-Hinte, *Soul Power* (New York, 2009), 6 minutes 31 seconds.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Erenberg, 'Rumble in the Jungle', 90. See also Mailer, *The Fight*, 23.

that the fight detailed the story "From slaveship to championship". 61 However, Mobutu seemed to have had no problems protesting colonialism. One poster read: "The country of Zaire which has been bled because of pillage and systematic exploitation must become a fortress against imperialism and a spearhead for the liberation of the African continent."62 At the centre of many of these messages was the face of Mobutu. Mobutu used the fight to present himself as a powerful and wealthy leader of Zaire. 63 Boxing posters for the fight proclaimed "Ali and Foreman have confidence in Mobutu. So do like them, have confidence in Mobutu".64



'Poster for Rumble in the Jungle'<sup>65</sup>

Mobutu was keenly aware of the publicity opportunity presented to him by the fight, ensuring that luxury villas were provided for foreign journalists and that the streets

Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Ibid., 92. See Appendix for poster.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Erenberg, 'Rumble in the Jungle', 91.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Leon Gast, When We Were Kings (Florida, 1996), 1 hour, 8 seconds.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Robert Edward Auctions (https://bid.robertedwardauctions.com/bidplace.aspx?itemid=22984) [accessed 19 February 2014].

would be safe around Kinshasa Stadium where the fight was to be held. 66 How successful were Mobutu's efforts?

It is important to distinguish between short-term and long-term effects of Mobutu's efforts. Initially many of Mobutu's efforts internationally appear to have been successful. Prior to the Heavyweight Match, Time Magazine noted:

"The real winner will be President Mobutu Sese Seko. The ballyhoo for "The Fight of the Century" has made the proud President's country an international household word—though a frequently mispronounced one (Zeye-ear)". 67

Indeed after the fight Muhammad Ali became a publicity machine for Zaire. When questioned on Zaire in 1975, Ali remarked fondly and used Zaire to draw sharp criticisms of the US:

"In Zaire everything was black - from the train drivers and hotel owners to the teachers in the schools and the pictures on the money. It was just like any other society, except it was all black and, because I'm black oriented and a Muslim I was home there. I'm not home here [in the United States]". <sup>68</sup>

Such was the initial success of Mobutu's international publicity that correspondence from US President Gerald Ford to Mobutu remarked upon the decade of impressive

(http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,908911,00.html) [accessed 29 December 2013].

<sup>68</sup> Paul Campbell, 'From the Vault: The Poetry of the Rumble in the Jungle'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Mailer, *The Fight*, 111. Mobutu ensured such safety through a program of mass arrests one month prior to the fight in Kinshasa (Mailer, *The Fight*, 111).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> 'Zaire: Mobutu the Mighty', Time Magazine, 28 October 1974

accomplishment in Zaire.<sup>69</sup> In the UK, Johnny Wakelin released two songs about Ali and the fight, which became successes in the UK, US and Australia.<sup>70</sup> Mobutu even appears to have had some success among his African compatriots, with Adelman noting in 1975, that Zaire's policy of *authenticité* was being emulated in other African States.<sup>71</sup>

In the long-term, Mobutu's efforts were not successful. The growing corruption and instability in Zaire from the 1970s until Mobutu's exile in 1997, following an effective overthrow of government by Laurent-Désiré Kabila, largely damaged such redeeming qualities as people may have found in his rule. Whereas in 1974 people would write of Zaire positively in the lead up to the 'Rumble in the Jungle', scholars are much more likely to view the expense of the fight as symbolic of the misappropriation of funds synonymous with Mobutu.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Ring Magazine's November-December 1974 cover featuring Ali and Foreman leaving Zaire with bundles of cash would become a more negative image in later decades.<sup>73</sup> And while the 'Rumble in the Jungle' may still hold weight in boxing folklore, the influence of Zaire is often relegated out of memory. Soccer too has suffered. Prior to 1974, soccer appeared to have been a success story for Zaire but recent research has uncovered evidence of threats of violence toward players, unpaid bonuses to players and broken promises.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, 'Correspondences between President Ford and Mobutu', *Gerald R. Ford*, 21 November 1975.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> David Roberts, *British Hit Singles & Albums* (London, 2006), 589.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Adelman, 'The Recourse to Authenticity and Négritude in Zaire', 134.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Garner, 'Congo and Korea: a study in divergence', 342.

<sup>73 &#</sup>x27;Where do we go from Zaire?', The Ring, Nov-Dec 1974. See Appendix.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Phoba and Muya, *Entre le Coupe et L'election* being a fine example of this.

The situation was much the same internally. Phoba and Muya documented the close unity felt in Zaire in the short-term under Mobutu, but the effects were fleeting.<sup>75</sup> Following a sharp drop in copper prices in 1974, and economic mismanagement following a disastrous campaign of nationalisation in the early 1970s, Zaire's economic power vanished.<sup>76</sup> Growing political instability, coupled with infighting within the M.P.R. and seeming disinterest from Mobutu in Sport following the economic decline of Zaire, led to a reversal of many of his previous successes.<sup>77</sup> Such was the disinterest in football that Mobutu allowed the withdrawal of the Leopards from the qualification for the 1978 World Cup on the grounds that the team allegedly were not patriotic enough.<sup>78</sup> The instability and civil war, which followed Mobutu's exile in 1997, ensured that any semblance of an internal united identity created during the early years of Mobutu's reign was gone.<sup>79</sup> His efforts appear to have been futile in the long-term but for one brief moment in 1974 it appeared as if the brutal Dictator of Zaire had succeeded.

In 2013, Ward lamented the fact that 'mainstream' historians appear uninterested in what sporting history has to offer.<sup>80</sup> The goal of this paper was to place Sport within a larger socio-political context and thereby demonstrate how Sport can be utilised in State identity formation. It was argued that Zairian Dictator Joseph Mobutu utilised sport to help foster a Zairian identity both internally and internationally. In detailing this, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Ibid., 40 minutes, 41 seconds.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Wrong, 'The Emperor Mobutu', 94.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Thierry Michel, *Mobutu: Roi du Zaire: Episode II* (Brussels, 1997), 19 minutes 45 seconds.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Simon Kuper, *Football Against the Enemy* (London, 1994), 102.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> 'Africa's Great War', The Economist Magazine, 06 July 2002

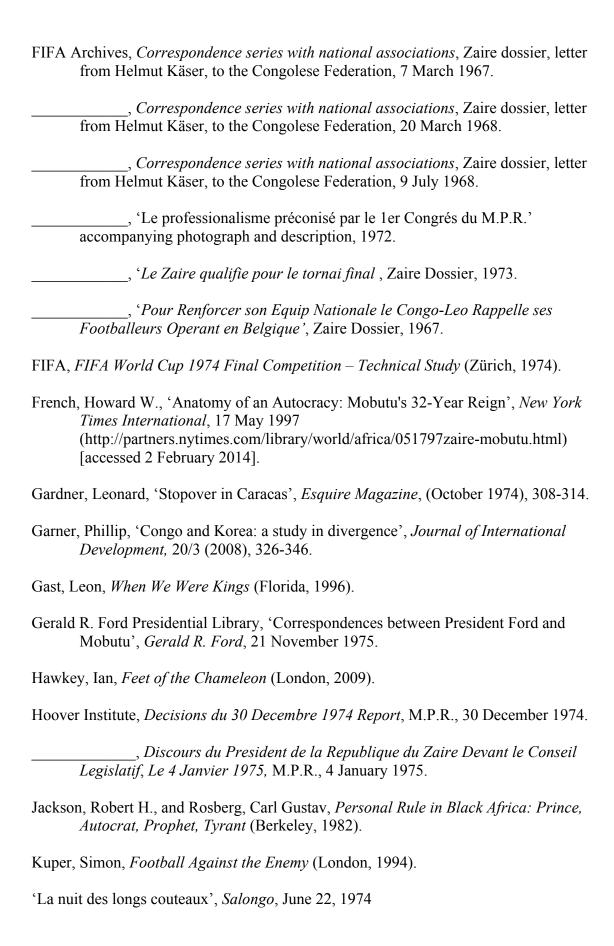
<sup>(</sup>http://www.economist.com/node/1213296) [accessed 4 February 2014].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Paul Ward, 'Last Man Picked. Do Mainstream Historians Need to Play with Sports Historians?', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 30/1 (2013), 7.

paper examined the background to Mobutu's reign, before examining efforts at internal and international identity formation through the medium of Sport. The paper concluded by arguing that, while in the long-term Mobutu's efforts largely failed, in the short-term they appeared to be successful. It is lamentable if, as Ward alleges, 'mainstream' historians view sporting history as something outside of the socio-political world in which they operate. Such an approach is to the detriment of all historical inquiry, as sporting history can provide an insight into the overall understanding of a nation's history. Sporting history in Zaire by no means constitutes a definitive history of the country, but Sport was certainly a cultural weapon used successfully by Mobutu in the early years of his reign and is thus integral to a proper study of Zairian history.

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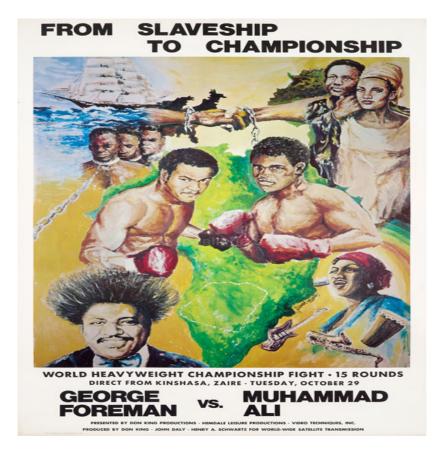
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## **Appendix**

## 1) 1970 Congo Banknote – 10 Makuta



# 2) Banned Poster for 'Rumble in the Jungle' Heavyweight Boxing Match



# 3) Ring Magazine 'Where do we go from Zaire', Nov-Dec 1974 Cover

