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NATIVE

*African Football's
Growing Impact at
the World Cup*

IBRAHIM MUSTAPHA

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Zaire – African Ignorance and Mobutu’s Influence

THE WORLD Cup of 1974 may have been the tenth edition of the tournament but for many fans and observers of the global game, this would be their first experience of seeing a team from sub-Saharan Africa playing football at any level. The tournament had seen fleeting glimpses of Egypt and Morocco previously, but there was generally a greater familiarity with teams from the north of the continent due to its proximity to Europe, and the fact several players from the region had already migrated to European clubs. Zaire, on the other hand, was far further south than many in the global north would have even been aware of, let alone travelled to, and was certainly an unknown entity as far as football was concerned. However, it isn’t as though they had simply wandered in off the street to compete at the World Cup. This was, at the time, an African powerhouse who had lifted the coveted African Cup of Nations just three months earlier. They may not have shown it in West Germany, but the team known as the Leopards were something of a force to be reckoned with back in Africa and the story behind their

calamitous World Cup experience is far, far more complex than it appears.

The large region in the centre of Africa today known as the Democratic Republic of Congo has a storied, complicated and brutal history. In pre-colonial times, the transatlantic slave trade saw millions of Africans forcibly transported from its western coast to the Americas, leading to the region becoming increasingly fragmented and impoverished. European settlers were reluctant to venture inland, meaning much of the area initially remained free of colonial rule. From 1874 however, the British explorer Henry Morton Stanley, on behalf of Belgium's King Leopold II, was sent to the region and eventually established treaties with local rulers along the Congo River in order to gain territory. These treaties in essence saw land surrendered to Stanley and the Belgian monarch and under the guise of humanitarian work, Leopold set up the International African Association. At the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 and the notorious 'Scramble for Africa' where the continent was divided up among European superpowers, the controversial monarch was granted the personal and private control of what he called the Congo Free State.

As far as ironic names go, they don't get much wider of the mark than this. What followed was a brutal campaign of forced labour where natives were put to work to extract ivory and rubber for growing international markets. Failure to comply or even meet the demand resulted in beatings, dismemberment of hands or feet, and shootings. There were also stories of torture, beheadings and the burning of entire towns to the ground. As an estimate, reports range between ten to 15 million deaths from a lengthy campaign of atrocities before Belgium annexed the region in 1908, creating the Belgian Congo. While not as horrifying as the

Free State, the country was still under colonial rule and in 1959, deadly protests saw increased calls for independence which was finally granted a year later. The newly established Democratic Republic of the Congo was still in a state of chaos when the first democratically elected Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, was assassinated in 1961, and a CIA-backed coup saw military officer Mobutu Sese Seko seize power in 1965.

The country was crying out for stability and its own identity, and Mobutu felt he was the man to provide it. But this was by no means through benevolence. As one of Africa's 'big men' leaders, Mobutu enacted a system which made it impossible for political opponents to challenge his position. Those who did were imprisoned, tortured or worse. An ultra-nationalist stance saw him rename the country Zaire in 1971 and change his own name from Joseph-Désiré Mobutu to Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu waza Banga, which translated as 'The all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, goes from conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake'. An emphatic proclamation of how he viewed himself, just in case there was any doubt. With his trademark leopard-skin hat perpetually perched atop his head, the flamboyant dictator's one-party rule would see him unopposed at elections, giving him free rein over the country's economy and finances with support from the USA due to his supposed anti-communist and anti-Soviet position. Over the years Mobutu would line his own pockets while his people suffered. He did, however, invest heavily in sport as a means of winning over the masses.

Mobutu's backing paid off on the football field as the team won the 1968 Africa Cup of Nations in Ethiopia, beating the dominant Ghana side of that era 1-0 in the final. As part of Mobutu's campaign of 'authenticity', all

players were required to be based domestically, meaning those playing abroad would have to return if they were to represent the national team. Conversely, Mobutu looked overseas to find the team's manager. In 1972, Yugoslavian Blagoje Vidinić was hired to take charge ahead of Zaire's World Cup qualification campaign, having already managed an African side in the form of Morocco at the tournament in Mexico two years earlier. Zaire cruised through the first three rounds of qualifying by beating Togo, old rivals Ghana, and Cameroon before a showdown with Vidinić's former side in the final-round three-team group, which also featured Zambia. After two wins against the latter, Zaire welcomed Morocco to Kinshasa knowing a win would see them become the first African team from south of the Maghreb to reach the World Cup. FIFA's report of what was by all accounts a feisty affair claims 'crunching tackles rained down on the north Africans, urged on by an increasingly desperate crowd'. The home side took the lead after a 'frantic goal-mouth scramble' in which Kembo Uba Kembo forced the ball over the line despite claims from the Moroccan goalkeeper, Ahmed Belkourchi, that he had been fouled. Two more goals saw Zaire, and by extension Mobutu, make history and reach the finals in West Germany. Morocco, so incensed by the refereeing in the match, withdrew from the return fixture, handing Zaire a walkover.

The scale of the achievement was monumental. Mobutu rewarded each player with a house and car as a token of his appreciation for bringing a sense of pride to the nation, and presumably distracting the population from his kleptocratic rule. In March 1974, the team returned from Egypt to a raucous ovation at Kinshasa airport. Zaire had secured the Nations Cup for a second time following a 2-0 win over Zambia in a replayed final thanks to two goals from striker

Ndaye Mulamba. Although not a household name outside of Africa, Ndaye was a legend both in his own country and across the continent. As well as his AFCON-winning strikes, he also scored a brace in the semi-final victory against tournament hosts Egypt on top of both goals in the original drawn final, which had ended 2-2. At this point, it's worth pointing out that two goals from that initial game – one for each team – came from set-piece free kicks with Zaire very much adhering to, and fully understanding the laws of the game.

In total, Ndaye finished the 1974 Cup of Nations with nine strikes, winning the golden boot and being named player of the tournament. Forty-seven years and 23 AFCONs later, no player has scored as many goals in a single edition of the competition.

Optimism was high ahead of the expedition to Europe with much of the squad seeing the tournament as a chance to showcase their talents on the global stage and perhaps earn lucrative moves abroad. Mayanga Maku, another star of the team, was nicknamed 'The Brazilian' due to his impressive dribbling ability. Defender Bwanga Tshimen, the reigning African footballer of the year, also earned a title of high regard with journalists referring to him as the 'Black Beckenbauer'. Pulling the strings in midfield was Mavuba Mafuila, himself known as the 'Black Sorcerer'.

As well as colourful aliases for the players, Mobutu had previously changed the nickname of the team from the Lions – the more traditional but commonly used name by teams from the continent – to his preferred title of the Leopards. As such, the squad arrived in Europe with one of the most iconic shirt designs in World Cup history. A green Adidas top with a yellow collar and trim on the sleeves was enlivened by a giant crest of a cartoon leopard holding a football encased in

a yellow circle front and centre of the chest. Presumably the animal was given such prominence to somehow intimidate opponents, and it was now time for Zaire to potentially put that into practice and show their ability to the world beyond Africa.

They kicked off their campaign against a buoyant Scotland side who very much fancied their chances of going deep in the competition. Managed by Willie Ormond, the Scottish squad contained the likes of Peter Lorimer, Joe Jordan, an ageing Denis Law, a young Kenny Dalglish, and was captained by Billy Bremner. Ahead of the game, Ormond was quoted as saying Scotland would pack up and go home if they were unable to beat their African opponents and named a 34-year-old Law in his starting 11, despite the fact the ex-Manchester United great was very much in the autumn of his career. 'Get in and kill them with goals,' was the instruction given to the former Ballon d'Or winner by his manager according to *The Mirror*.

The Scots took the lead midway through the first half in Dortmund thanks to Lorimer's stunning right-foot volley from the edge of the penalty area after Jordan's knock-down. Ten minutes later, the debutants were two down when a comically poor attempt at an offside trap allowed an unmarked Jordan to get on the end of a Bremner free kick on the right-hand side and power a header towards goal. The effort certainly looked saveable for goalkeeper Kazadi Mwamba, only for the stopper to let the ball slip between his right arm and hip to cross the line. The expected goal-fest didn't materialise, however, as the Zaire defence held firm in the face of Scotland's second-half attacks. Kazadi would somewhat atone for his error with a string of fine saves including a sensational acrobatic effort to tip another Lorimer volley on to the crossbar. At the other end, Mayanga tested

David Harvey with a long-range shot while Ndaye just failed to make enough contact with a low cross late on that would have halved the deficit. Even in defeat, Zaire had little to be ashamed of from their first World Cup match. 'Zaire were an eye-opener,' wrote *The Times's* Geoffrey Green. 'Their movements are snaky, they have a low centre of gravity, and their control is on the ground, with the accent on attack, as fresh as a summer breeze on a lovely summer night.'

Unfortunately, this was where things started to go downhill with the breeze becoming more of a tornado within the camp. Zaire's heroes were due a major qualification bonus as well as match payments, none of which were initially received and were instead seemingly withheld amid a huge travelling delegation to the tournament that included Mobutu's cohorts, members of the military and government officials. As late as 24 hours ahead of the second match against Yugoslavia, the money was still not forthcoming, causing the players to stay up late into the night arguing and debating over what to do next. Mayanga would later claim the official responsible for the money simply fled to the airport before the players woke up the following day, 18 June: 'He left. We never saw him again. He left with the money, and that was it.'

Furious, tired and demoralised and with just hours until kick-off against the eastern Europeans, there were now whispers of a mutiny and even a boycott by the players in response to the thievery. In the end, Zaire's disgruntled stars reluctantly took to the field at the Parkstadion, but it is difficult to imagine that any sanction or punishments they might have received for failing to show up would have been worse than what was to follow. A limp, disinterested and half-hearted display allowed Yugoslavia to race into a 3-0 lead inside 20 minutes. Vidinić, a former goalkeeper

himself who had won gold at the Olympics with Yugoslavia 14 years earlier, could only respond by replacing his own stopper Kazadi with Tubilandu Ndimbi after the third goal. Further adding to their misery was the early dismissal of Ndaye after an apparent case of mistaken identity. A kick aimed at Colombian referee Omar Delgado Gómez saw the official respond with a red card for the forward, although it was widely acknowledged afterwards that the culprit was in fact a certain Mwepu Ilunga. With little room for mercy, the onslaught didn't cease as Zaire found themselves 6-0 down at the break and conceded three further goals in the second half to record the joint record highest World Cup finals defeat of 9-0 – matching South Korea's thrashing at the hands of Hungary in 1954.

The reaction to the match was scathing. 'Contemptuous annihilation' were the words of Hugh McIlvanney in *The Observer*. On the ITV broadcast, Gerald Sinstadt remarked that the cause of African football had been 'set back' and '[the] case to have the number of African nations in the World Cup increased can hardly have been strengthened by this performance'.

Writing in *The Mirror*, Harry Miller was even stronger on this point, 'Every fan back home bemoaning England's absence from these finals is entitled to cry into his cuppa this morning.' The English, world champions just eight years earlier, famously missed out on the latest tournament after failing to beat Poland in their final qualifier at Wembley. 'Consider instead the clamour for increased representation of countries such as Zaire in the next World Cup finals. With powerful nations like England at home kicking their heels, it makes little sense,' bemoaned Miller.

The writer's rage would have been exacerbated further at the end of the group stages. Between Zaire and their fellow

debutants from outside of Europe and South America, only Australia collected just a single point from their three matches thanks to a 0-0 draw with Chile, while Haiti were also on the receiving end of a hammering, going down 7-0 to the Poles as they too crashed out with three defeats from three matches.

As if Zaire's record-equalling loss wasn't bad enough, the fact they were coached by a Yugoslavian raised suspicions and sparked conspiracy theories, particularly from those north of the border in Britain, with the implication that Vidinić sabotaged his team to boost the goal difference for his compatriots and better that of Scotland. That suspicion gained further traction given the early removal of Kazadi for the 5ft 4in reserve keeper Tubilandu. In reality, this was just a further example of the anarchy within the camp with Vidinić apparently ordered to make the change from above. 'Mr Lockwa, the representative of the Ministry of Sport, said after the third Yugoslav goal, "Take that keeper off." I did,' the manager revealed. 'I assure you: I'll never again give the government permission to make changes to my team.'

Not that Vidinić would get the opportunity as he would end up leaving his post at the conclusion of the tournament. For the players, they were now in a quandary. Their protest may have had the desired effect, but the subsequent humiliation left them in no position to demand their owed bonus payments.

And so to the infamous match against Brazil. The world champions had actually drawn blanks in their first two group games and faced the prospect of an early exit if they failed to find their shooting boots against Zaire. Jairzinho calmed early nerves by opening the scoring on 14 minutes with a lethal drive from the edge of the box into the bottom corner beyond the recalled Kazadi. Much like the game against Scotland,

and in a complete contrast to the fiasco against Yugoslavia, Zaire were far more assured defensively and it was only in the 67th minute that the favourites were able to double their lead through Rivellino's unstoppable bullet of a strike into the top-right corner. Things were still looking respectable late on until Brazil substitute Mirandinha charged through the middle of the park before being unceremoniously upended by Tshimen just outside the penalty area. Then of course came Ilunga's moment of ignominy and the kick that will be remembered and replayed for as long as football is discussed.

'A bizarre moment of African ignorance,' was how commentator John Motson described this extraordinary moment, although curiously, in the immediate aftermath of the match, there was actually very little focus on Ilunga. Far more opprobrium was levelled at the poor performance of Brazil and their good fortune when Valdomiro's mishit cross-shot was able to squeeze under Kazadi at his near post to seal a 3-0 win. Crucially, this scoreline confirmed Brazil's qualification from Group Two in second place at the expense of Scotland. That this decisive goal came just minutes after the free kick farce meant Ilunga was spared scrutiny in the early reports of the game. Peter Corrigan, writing in *The Observer*, instead chose to discuss the performance of 'Zaire's brave little Imp of a goalkeeper' – Kazadi was reportedly just 5ft 9in in height – and the third goal which was, in Corrigan's words, 'unworthy of the Watney Cup let alone the World Cup'.

The underdogs were of secondary, or in fact, no concern to the main narrative of who from Yugoslavia, Scotland or Brazil would fill the top two slots in the group. In the end, it came down to which teams scored most goals against the Africans. That Brazil only just managed to squeeze through, albeit unconvincingly, was the main talking point. The

Associated Press report which was carried by publications around the world read, 'Brazil disappointed its fans by not scoring more against Zaire,' which served to highlight how little regard the African team was held in. Corrigan would at least acknowledge their 'clumsy courage' and 'stout, if crude defence' to keep the Brazil goal tally as low as they could.

It was only with time that Ilunga's reckless act would come into focus. As technology advanced over the following decades, the popularisation of compiling amusing football moments for TV shows and home media meant you would almost certainly be guaranteed to see this unforgettable moment replayed over and over again. Clipped from one such collection and posted on video-sharing social media platform YouTube, the voiceover cruelly describes Zaire as 'the clowns of football'. British TV presenter Nick Hancock was often the face of these compilations by the turn of the century and narrating the incident on his *Football Nightmares* VHS and DVD, Hancock jokingly sympathises with referee Nicolae Rainea, stating, 'It's bad enough having to ref teams that wantonly break the rules, but it's worse when they don't even know them.'

Again, at the time it was easy for everybody to assume Ilunga's act was born of ignorance and a lack of knowledge. This of course predated the days of wall-to-wall media coverage, the internet and social media – a player simply couldn't log on from his smartphone at full time and explain away his actions in 280 characters. In fact, it would be years before the more sinister circumstances surrounding the Leopards' laughably poor showing would come to light.

In an interview with the BBC in 2002, Ilunga claimed that back home, Mobutu was incensed by the shame the players had brought on the country following the record defeat to Yugoslavia. The dictator apparently sent his

representatives to the ground in West Germany to let the players know their performance was less than acceptable and that a repeat certainly wouldn't be tolerated in the Brazil game.

'After the match, he sent his presidential guards to threaten us,' the defender revealed. 'They closed the hotel to all journalists and said that if we lost 0-4 to Brazil, none of us would be able to return home.' Mayanga concurred, 'We had to come out with honour. Three goals or less.'

This perhaps explains the improved overall display in the final match but what about the free kick? A more sympathetic belief is that Ilunga kicked the ball away in a state of panic as he desperately wanted to keep the scoreline down for the sake of his and his team-mates' safety. However, that still wouldn't quite explain the player's actions given the referee would simply order a retake, and the fact the score was just 2-0 with little over ten minutes to avoid conceding twice more. Perhaps Ilunga was more calculated than people gave him credit for, and this was simply a time-wasting tactic to disturb the Brazilian rhythm. In a later interview, again with the BBC in 2010, the player shed more light on the kick, claiming it was neither an act of ignorance nor fear, but rather one of protest against his president's regime and a response to the stolen bonus payments.

'I did that deliberately,' he said. 'I was aware of football regulations. I did not have a reason to continue getting injured while those who will benefit financially were sitting on the terraces watching.'

Having failed to see red for what looked, in hindsight, a deliberate act to get sent off by lashing out at the official in the Yugoslavia match, Ilunga was determined to try again against Brazil. 'I know the rules very well, but the referee was quite lenient and only gave me a yellow card,' he said.

This explanation calls into question the seriousness of the alleged threats made by Mobutu. That Ilunga still believed he could commit this act of defiance, which he knew would result in further embarrassment, suggests the dangers awaiting them back in Zaire have perhaps been overstated. A 4-0 defeat seems like a very specific scoreline to try and avoid, too.

Sadly, Ilunga passed away in 2015 aged 65 so there will be no further explanation of what was going through his head on that fateful day in Gelsenkirchen. To his credit, he would lean into the joke later in life, unafraid and unashamed to recreate the famous kick for entertainment purposes, including for British comedy show *Fantasy Football League* in 1994. During a sketch for the 'Phoenix from the Flames' segment, Ilunga is very much in on the joke, with a beaming smile and infectious, enthusiastic laugh as he re-enacts the incident and plays up to the idea he didn't know the rules.

Alongside the Yugoslavia shambles and the fact that Zaire didn't register a single goal at the tournament, it made for one of the worst showings at a World Cup to that point or since. Returning home, the welcome at Kinshasa was a stark contrast to just months earlier when scores of people excitedly packed the airport to see captain Kidumu Mantantu disembark from the team jet with the gleaming African Nations Cup held above his head.

'We came back from the World Cup and we didn't find any welcome,' lamented defender Kabasu Babo speaking on the 2002 documentary series *History of Football – The Beautiful Game*. 'No one at the airport. We were picked up by taxi drivers, fans who liked us and found us wandering round the airport. So, there you see the welcome which we were given.'

Somewhat ominously upon their arrival, the players were summoned via a national public address, to a 'meeting' at Mobutu's presidential palace. Once there, they were told by the dictator to forget any aspirations they may have had of pursuing a career in football outside of Zaire, as they were now forbidden to do so. The players were then kept on the compound for four days before being allowed to return to their families. They wouldn't receive a penny for their efforts, resulting in many going on to live out their days in poverty like most of their fellow countrymen under Mobutu's rule. Players who should have been treated like royalty instead became pariahs.

Perhaps the most tragic of these players would be Ndaye. The record-breaking goalscorer remained with Zairean side AS Vita Club for the remainder of his career, and was honoured at the 1994 AFCON in Tunisia for his goals at the tournament 20 years earlier. After returning, however, he was the victim of a home invasion as armed robbers in military uniform broke into his house demanding money and his medals before shooting him twice in the leg as well as killing his 11-year-old son in the process. Following his recovery, Ndaye fled the country and lived destitute in Cape Town, South Africa. His whereabouts only came to light when his death was incorrectly announced at the 1998 AFCON tournament in Burkina Faso. Despite being wheelchair-bound as a result of the shooting and with his health deteriorating, Ndaye received little help from his country's football authorities and died broke aged 70 in 2019.

What of Mobutu? That World Cup display seemingly killed the erratic ruler's interest in football, and he would switch his attentions, and financial support, to boxing. Kinshasa of course went on to host the famous 'Rumble in the Jungle' between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman

on 30 October that year. Mobutu's courting of Ali, an outspoken proponent of pan-African thinking, was another major distraction for the Zairean population as the president plundered the country's coffers. Advertising the fight as a 'Gift from President Mobutu to the people of Zaire', he attempted to boost his own reputation both at home and abroad by presenting an apparent image of stability to the rest of the world.

The dictator held on to power until 1997 when, amid failing health from a cancer diagnosis, tensions with neighbouring Rwanda and Uganda, internal unrest, and no more support from the West, his government fell to rebel forces led by the Congolese revolutionary Laurent-Désiré Kabila. Mobutu died in exile in Morocco later that year aged 66.

The ongoing battle for supremacy among the European and South American elite meant problems for the relatively insignificant whipping boys further down the food chain were not something the football world gave much consideration. Rather than scratch the surface to understand why a team like Zaire would be so laughably bad, the convenient narrative of 'ignorance' would prevail. The idea the players were simply not smart enough to understand the rules was quite simply easier to digest, but one wonders if wider knowledge of Mobutu's reign of terror might have made a difference to the perception of Zaire and their dismal display at the tournament. It wouldn't be the last, or even the first time, politics and football would cross over and have an impact on the fortunes of African football.