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Évelyne Combeau-Mari, *Le sport colonial à Madagascar, 1896-1960*. Paris: Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer, 2009. 241 pp. Maps, figures, notes, and bibliography. €40.00 (pb). ISBN 2-85970-042-0.

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Although still typically underestimated as an important setting for the encounter of the colonizer and the colonized, sport in the former French empire has, in recent years, become the focus of significant research activity. Of course, the link between the “games ethic” and imperialism has also been examined by historians working in other colonial contexts, especially the British one. Memorably characterized by J. A. Mangan as “Britain’s chief spiritual export”, colonial sport has thus been revealed to serve as “moral metaphor, political symbol, and cultural bond”.<sup>[1]</sup> However, it was long assumed that France colonized differently, in spite of the abiding influence on global sporting institutions and cultures of such committed French imperialists as Baron Pierre de Coubertin.<sup>[2]</sup> Today remembered as the founder of the modern Olympics in 1896 – coincidentally the year of Madagascar’s colonization by the French – Coubertin identified school-based “English Games” as an essential component of the economic, military, and political dominance of France’s principal rival overseas. Like others of his generation, Coubertin would be drawn to sport in the wake of the military catastrophe of 1870, looking to it as an instrument of national revitalization, both at home and in the colonies. A key development in the historiography of French imperialism’s commitment to institutionalized athleticism was the exhibition “L’Empire du sport”, held in 1992 at the Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, in Aix-en-Provence.<sup>[3]</sup> This pioneering event was part of a broader opening-up of colonial history at that time, prompted most obviously by the thirtieth anniversary of Algerian independence, and thus France’s definitive retreat from overseas empire.

In fact, sport had itself played a significant part in Algerian decolonization, not least through the targeting of stadiums on both sides of the Mediterranean for nationalist bomb attacks and assassinations. However, it was on the symbolic level that modern games were most effectively mobilized by the Front de Libération Nationale, through the establishment, in April 1958, of a national soccer team in exile in Tunis. Made up of Algerian players from the French professional league, the team was led by Rachid Mekhloufi (also spelt Mekloufi), the celebrated “footballer of the revolution”, and was revisited by Pierre Lanfranchi in 1994, in an important article published in *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*.<sup>[4]</sup> This historical connection between sport and the end of empire was given a new public visibility by the victory of France, additionally the host nation, in the 1998 football World Cup. The exploits of the *black-blanc-beur* French team, epitomized by their iconic playmaker, Zinedine Zidane, drew popular and scholarly attention to the relationship between ethnicity and issues of post-colonial citizenship, empowerment, and social inclusion. This investment, both moral and material, continues in events such as the twin exhibitions on football and immigration organized in 2010 by the Cité Nationale de l’Histoire de l’Immigration and the Musée National du Sport.<sup>[5]</sup> Meanwhile, Zidane himself, following his retirement from international competition in the most dramatic of circumstances at the 2006 World Cup, has been persuasively inserted into a broader narrative of

France's "soccer empire", to adopt the striking formulation suggested by Laurent Dubois in his own recent book on the subject.<sup>[6]</sup>

Such scholarly interventions suggest that the study of sport may enable us to look beyond the memory wars of the end of empire, as part of an expanded engagement with the complexities of France's colonial past. To date, research in this field has typically been conducted by sports specialists working on local case-studies. These include the valuable publications of Évelyne Combeau-Mari, whose monograph on sport in the overseas department of La Réunion (1998) is part of a wider exploration of leisure practices in the former French empire, and particularly the territories of the Indian Ocean. She has also edited a volume on sport and the press (2007, to which this reviewer contributed), and was one of several historians to focus attention on rugby on the occasion of that game's 2007 World Cup, again hosted by France.<sup>[7]</sup> As we shall see, this last interest has served her particularly well in a sporting context far removed from William Webb Ellis and Rugby School.

Combeau-Mari's latest monograph, devoted to Madagascar, is consequently to be welcomed; all the more so in that, with the obvious exception of the 1947 uprising, the territory is still evoked relatively rarely by historians of the French empire. The first synthetic history of sport in Madagascar, her study presents an overview that ranges from indigenous combat sports, through military-based gymnastics and equestrianism, and the major team sports of football and rugby, to the track and field events showcased at the Jeux de la Communauté in April 1940, just two months before the island's independence. Her approach foregrounds the inherent ambivalence of imported games in the colonial context, where the relevant practices' characterizing combinations of ludic, associative, and spectacular functions served to attract colonizers, indigenous elites, and then a broader Malagasy public for reasons that were sometimes complementary but more often contradictory. Sport would thus be appealed to not only as an instrument of colonization (through the familiar vectors of education, distinction, integration, and, ultimately, assimilation), but also of decolonization (as one of the rare public spaces available for indigenous association and agitation, allowing the expression of otherwise denied identities, and permitting both real and symbolic confrontation with the colonizer).

Although this volume is relatively short, totaling 225 pages for the main text, it is nevertheless impressive in scope, and also scrupulously annotated. Combeau-Mari draws effectively on the limited amount of available literature in the field (both in French and English), which includes particularly the incisive contribution of Eric Jennings, whose work on the colonial spa (2006) underlines the strong linkage in the French context between the medicalization of leisure and the rise of modern games.<sup>[8]</sup> As regards her own empirical research, Combeau-Mari presents substantial new material gleaned from both national and private archives in France and Madagascar, together with various articles drawn from the colonial press, and some particularly valuable oral testimony. The text is illustrated with a number of helpful maps and over sixty excellent photographs. Those images drawn from the Fonds Gallieni housed at the CAOM are particularly telling, such as the remarkable picture of the General himself, a keen cyclist, at the Mahamasina velodrome, surrounded by the white-flannelled and pith-helmeted members of the Sport Club de Tananarive. Founded in 1897, just a year after the imposition of French rule, this association underlined the structural linkage between the leisure activities of military men and the development of sport in Madagascar, paralleling processes that had occurred in France itself in the wake of 1870. The leading role played by Gallieni in the nascent sporting sphere -- as in so many others on the island -- similarly underlines a pattern of voluntarism in both locations, mirroring the actions of sporting visionaries in the metropole such as Paschal Grousset, Georges de Saint-Clair, Philippe Tissié, and, of course, Pierre de Coubertin himself.

It is a significant strength of her new study that Combeau-Mari's adopted methodology should vary in response to the demands of the particular object of study in her nine substantive chapters. Thus, the fascinating account of indigenous body cultures which opens the volume is informed by her own anthropological field-work, supplemented by that of graduate researchers under her supervision. The geographically-specific varieties of wrestling, boxing, and kick-boxing presented by the author are examined alongside ritualized contests between men and the local Zebu cattle, a form of bull-fighting reflecting the animals' importance in both the island's agricultural economy and its pre-colonial religious traditions. Setting her account of this codified violence within the "civilizing process" postulated by Norbert Elias (1939) and the associated sociology of sport articulated by Elias and Eric Dunning (1986)[9], Combeau-Mari underlines both the richness of Madagascar's indigenous civilization and the combined manipulation and repression to which such traditional practices would be subjected after 1896, often leading to the emergence of a clandestine sporting culture to preserve these identity-based practices. However, we learn that, even here, there was an element of mixing or cultural *métissage* (pp. 26-31), in what would be the first in a series of sporting negotiations and reinventions rather than wholesale European impositions.

While the Compagnie française des Indes orientales first established a French presence in the island as early as 1642, it was the inhabitants' contact with competing Protestant and Catholic missionaries in the nineteenth century that would durably influence local elites, including well-placed converts to Christianity and others alive to strategic advantage on an island equally coveted by France and Great Britain. In the process, allegedly barbaric indigenous body cultures would be unfavorably compared with putatively civilized alternatives. After 1896, the French authorities' *politique des races* would selectively seek to manipulate, control, or ban traditional sports. Nevertheless, these were still widely practiced on a clandestine basis, especially by rural populations far removed from the colonial centers of power. More generally, we learn that imported European sports would have little impact on anyone outside the indigenous elites before the end of the 1930s (pp. 26-31).

What emerges particularly from Combeau-Mari's survey is that the pattern of sporting diffusion and development experienced in Madagascar mirrored that of France itself. This is true of the chronological sequence of the main sports' development (with the obvious exception of cycle road-racing, rendered impractical by the island's rugged topography), and also of the important roles played by competing social actors -- in this case, army officers, missionary educationalists, and colonial administrators. Moreover, this study highlights the fact that the dominant forms of sporting sociability in the France of the time -- typically reflecting a desire for self-promotion within a context of class-based solidarity -- were throughout exaggerated in a social context characterized by isolation and dislocation (pp. 55-57). Unsurprisingly, an even more obviously leading role was played by the military in the emergence of modern games in the colony than had occurred in *la mère patrie*. Here, Combeau-Mari persuasively links the colonial authorities' promotion of gymnastics as a "conscriptive" sporting practice designed to prepare future army recruits to the theorizing of indigenous military potential best known from General Charles Mangin's *La Force noire* (1910) (pp. 45-46).[10] She also stresses the investment made by the authorities in large-scale gymnastic displays or *fêtes*; proselytizing gatherings designed to permit the expression of patriotic support for every colonial regime from the Third Republic, through Vichy's "National Revolution", to the French Union and French Community.

Combeau-Mari's narrative also suggests that, as elsewhere, the inter-war years were crucial for both the popularization and the democratization of the imported sports. This was especially true of the island's preferred collective games of football and rugby, which were mobilized in this period by directly competing forces. The new vitality of these sports would consequently see their intended function as the physical manifestation of France's self-appointed "civilizing

mission” increasingly contested by Malagasy nationalists keen to harness sport to anti-colonial ends. The creation of “Franco-Malgache” sporting associations from 1917 onwards would allow broader and more autonomous access to practices that had been introduced by the colonizers, but which were now invested, and progressively subverted, by indigenous elites, and were consequently regarded with growing suspicion by the authorities. We learn that mounting military frustration with such developments throughout the 1930s, in spite of the colonial administration’s attempted reorganization of the sporting sphere, would underpin the authoritarian reaction of the Vichy period. Yet, the determination of the *État français* to mobilize sport in order to bring together *la jeunesse de la plus grande France* would, paradoxically, only serve to underline the fundamental division between colonizers and colonized (p. 171). The cataclysm of the 1947 rebellion was to lead post-war administrators in their turn, and once again in vain, to look to sport as a palliative for a colonial society manifestly on the brink of collapse.

The remarkable rise of rugby as a focus for Malagasy opposition to the French colonial presence is a highlight of Combeau-Mari’s fascinating account. Particularly concentrated in the *Hauts Plateaux* around the capital city of Antananarivo (formerly Tananarive), the game was mobilized, in the period 1947 to 1960, “en support d’émancipation nationale” (p. 193). The enthusiastic adoption of rugby in Madagascar constitutes a unique example of sporting diffusion in Africa, where football has overwhelmingly been the sport privileged by colonial nationalists (Dutch-speaking South Africans aside). For rugby appealed in a cultural context still strongly marked by traditional combat sports, and the game’s physical intensity in the inter-war years, especially in encounters between European and Malagasy teams, was an important factor in its emergence as a site of popular self-expression and anti-colonial agitation.

So strong were the nationalist connotations of the oval ball in the post-war period that rugby’s popularization and democratization not only coincided with but also actively contributed to Madagascar’s struggle for self-determination. Remarkably, the Fédération Française de Rugby agreed to send a French national team to play a two-match series against a Malagasy-only representative side in August 1953. Wearing the traditional blue international jersey with its cockerel motif, and including such top-class players as future national captain Christian Carrère, the French XV only managed to win 12-10 in the first encounter, narrowly avoiding a shock defeat that was reported on the front page of *L’Équipe*. Although the French won more convincingly in the second match, the competitive advance – and, crucially, the representative legitimacy – of the Madagascar rugby team would be recognized in September 1957, when the side was invited to France for a series of matches. Following three brilliant victories, the visitors upped the political stakes by visiting the exiled nationalist leader Dr Joseph Ravoahangy Andrianavalona, then under house arrest in Toulouse. The accidental death of one of the Malagasy players in their final match against the famous Racing Club de France was in turn represented by nationalists as a martyrdom on foreign soil, marking the culmination of this most unlikely transformation of Madagascar’s rugby clubs into “des lieux de préparation physique et morale à l’émancipation nationale” (pp. 207-208).

Against this backdrop, the Olympic-style Jeux de la Communauté held in Antananarivo from 13<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> April 1960 could only appear as a final failed attempt by French colonial administrators to mobilize sport against the unstoppable forces of decolonization. Thus regarded, and as Combeau-Mari suggests, they might well have more accurately been called the “Jeux de l’indépendance africaine” (p. 222); particularly in so far as they effectively pointed the way forward to the engagement of Madagascar, and Africa as a whole, with what we would today regard as the global sports system. To conclude, this absorbing monograph offers a valuable case-study of cultural diffusion, consolidation, and contestation in an under-researched colonial location, additionally drawing valuable lessons as regards the broader functioning of

sport as both practice and discourse. Wide-ranging, cogently argued, and impressively documented, Évelyne Combeau-Mari's fascinating history deserves to be widely read.

## NOTES

[1] J. A. Mangan, *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1986); J. A. Mangan (ed.) *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society* (London: Frank Cass, 1992). See especially "Prologue: Britain's Chief Spiritual Export: Imperial Sport as Moral Metaphor, Political Symbol and Cultural Bond", pp. 1-10.

[2] Pierre de Coubertin, *Essais de psychologie sportive* (Grenoble: Jérôme Million, 1992; first published in 1912). An important exception to this general pattern is the work of Marianne Amar, now responsible for research at the Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration, including particularly her *Nés pour courir: La Quatrième République face au sport* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1987).

[3] Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *L'Empire du sport: Les sports dans les anciennes colonies françaises* (Aix-en-Provence: Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, 1992).

[4] Pierre Lanfranchi, "Mekloufi, un footballeur français dans la guerre d'Algérie," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 103 (1994): 70-74. See also Hocine Seddiki, *Rachid Mekhloufi: l'imagination au bout du pied* (Algiers: Société Nationale d'Édition et de Diffusion, 1982); Paul Dietschy and David-Claude Kemo-Keimbou, *Le Football et l'Afrique* (Paris: FIFA and Éditions E/P/A, 2008); Michel Naït Challal, *Les Dribbleurs de l'Indépendance* (Paris: Prolongations and Berbère Télévision, 2008); Kader Abderrahim, *L'Indépendance comme seul but* (Paris: Paris Méditerranée, 2008).

[5] Claude Boli, Yvan Gastaut, and Fabrice Grognet, *Allez la France!: Football et Immigration* (Paris: Gallimard / Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration / Musée National du Sport, 2010).

[6] Laurent Dubois, *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010).

[7] Évelyne Combeau-Mari, *Sport et décolonisation à La Réunion* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998); Évelyne Combeau-Mari (ed.), *Sports et loisirs dans les colonies, XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris: SEDES / Le Publieur, 2004); Évelyne Combeau-Mari (ed.), *Sport et Presse en France (XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (Paris: Le Publieur, 2007); Évelyne Combeau-Mari, *L'Invention du rugby* (Paris: Les Quatre Chemins, 2007).

[8] Eric Jennings, *Curing the Colonizers: Hydrotherapy, Climatology, and French Colonial Spas* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006).

[9] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process, Vol. I: The History of Manners* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969); *The Civilizing Process, Vol. II: State Formation and Civilization*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982). This work was first published in German in 1939 as *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation* (Basel: Verlag Haus zum Falken). Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

[10] Charles Mangin, *La Force noire* (Paris: Hachette, 1910).

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