

Sport and Olympism in Africa

by Jean-Claude Ganga



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The immense and unceasing interest of the African countries in the Olympic Movement is irrefutable proof of the deep, sincere belief of African sportsmen in the ideals of peace, understanding and friendship embodied by Olympism. On this young continent of Africa, where the advent of friendlier and more compassionate human relationships has always been advocated, sport's unselfish contribution to the construction of a peaceful and united society, the grounds for greater confidence in sport and its virtues, can be explained by the fact that, with the practice of sport, the end in view corresponds very closely to the primordial aspirations of the peoples of Africa, namely, friendship, peace and solidarity. In fact, more can be done for mutual understanding between people on the sports field than in any other domain. Sport is the desire for liberation of the body and mind, a certain respect for rules, and constant self-appraisal and comparison with others. It belongs to everyone, even those who do not take part.

Africa has taken up the cause of sport with such enthusiasm that there is no need to over-emphasise its beneficial effects for men and women, young or old.

Having kept a watchful eye on African sport over the years, we can vouch for the fact that Africa is a bastion of sport and of the Olympic Movement, where people have devoted themselves with perception, militancy and love to the popularisation and development of sport so that it may, in turn, encourage the consolidation of universal ties.

Pierre de Coubertin's invaluable contribution

Nowadays it can be admitted that in Africa it was felt for a long time that the five rings of the Olympic emblem were really only four and

that the ring which represented the black continent was only there for the sake of the design, for with one or two exceptions, athletes from the black continent did not take part in the Olympic Games in their own right.

Nonetheless, in 1924, Pierre de Coubertin toyed with the idea of organising games for Africans in Africa. The contribution of this illustrious educationalist to the implantation of the Olympic ideal on this young continent can never be forgotten. His contribution was inestimable, especially when one considers that the man responsible for the revival of the modern Olympic Games, known and admired for the universal scope of his work, was the first to discern the African talent for Olympism and to express the desire to see the young people of Africa running in competitions organised on African soil. It is unfortunate that this wish of the father of modern Olympism could not be fulfilled, either in 1924 at Algiers or in 1927 at Alexandria. Fortunately, the torch was courageously taken up again forty years later by a town with less than 300,000 inhabitants, for they finally took place at Brazzaville, in the Congo, with the participation of thirty independent African countries. Three thousand athletes took part in these Games, which were organised under the patronage of the IOC, which recognised them as Regional Games. This recognition meant that the organising committee had to convince all the participating countries to set up National Olympic Committees recognised by the IOC, and so conform to the IOC rules for Regional Games. Thus it was, during the period preceding the first African Games, that Africa, awakening to Olympism, saw the creation of several NOCs. Its support for Olympism became a reality.

Mr. Avery Brundage, then President of the IOC, attended the first African Games where future champions, (of whom Keino, Olympic winner

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at Mexico and Munich is the most striking example) were revealed to the world. Brazzaville was not only the rallying point for African sportsmen, but also, most importantly, the place where the foundations of Olympism were laid in Africa. The first African Games also had the benefit of providing African sport with a body to co-ordinate and popularise sport with a view to more harmonious and coherent development.



This was the SCSA (Supreme Council for Sport in Africa) which today is increasingly recognised, in co-operation with continental sports confederations, for its capacity to forge its own methods of analysis and action, and to establish new studies of human affairs and problems in African sports in line with the needs of the continent and the requirements of the international context.

In this spirit of development and reinforcement of the sports movement and of Olympism, it is only right and proper that we should rejoice in the creation, in June 1981 at Lome (Togo), of

the AANOC (Association of African National Olympic Committees), which all Africans hope will give a new impetus to the protection 'of Olympic patriotism on the continent. We remain convinced that the joint efforts of the SCSA and the AANOC will rediscover for our young sportsmen and women that oasis of peace which is Olympism.

Another considerable contribution to the evolution of the African continent along the road to Olympism is, of course, the efficient and unselfish aid of the International Olympic Committee to the whole of African sport, leading to the realisation of a programme of action for top-class athletes, technicians and other training personnel in African sport. It is in this context also that the very profitable visits made by the Presidents of the IOC to Africa, particularly those of Lord Killanin and H.E. Mr. Juan Antonio Samaranch, must be noted, not forgetting the visits of other members of the IOC.

These visits have contributed not only to the reinforcement of links between the international Olympic Movement and our continent, but above all to a better understanding of African problems, and thus better co-operation.

The extraordinary attraction of the Olympic Games

Every four years, the entire world is filled with wonder at the moving spectacle of this festival of beauty. The young people of the world fill the stadia to take part in the most important, the most interesting competition of all - the Olympic Games. Participation in this popular festival is a source of great honour and pride for an athlete. It is no less wonderful today to see the African sports elite take an active part in these festivals of friendship, fraternity and personal effort.

We are happy to have been directly associated with the sensational entrance of Africa in the Olympiads, since those celebrated in 1968 at Mexico which constituted the culminating point of African participation in the Olympic Games.

About 400 athletes and more than a hundred officials from 27 countries on the continent

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Mary Chemweno (KEN).

undertook the voyage to Mexico, which led Mr. Brundage, then President of the IOC, to remark "I have never seen so many Africans at the Olympic Games".

The participation of our athletes was first-class. We declared then to the Press, "By the quantity and the quality of her participation in the Olympic Games at Mexico, Africa has fulfilled her contract towards Mexico and has proved to the world her attachment to the fundamental principles of Olympism. If the strains of the national anthems of Kenya, Ethiopia and Tunisia, and the ceremonies at which the silver and

bronze medals were presented to athletes from the Cameroons and Uganda, have swollen the hearts of the 500 Africans present at Mexico with justifiable emotion and pride, they have also made us aware of our duties and our responsibilities".

At the Olympiads which followed, notably at Munich (1972) and Moscow (1980), the African participation was also great, and it is certain that the representatives from Africa will be even more numerous at Los Angeles in 1984. We entirely share the optimism of President Samaranch when he says of these Games that they will be the "most important in the history of the Olympic Movement".

For several years now African athletes have achieved a standard which puts them in a good position in the hierarchy of international competition. Their strength, their skill and their courage are held up as examples to others. These splendid champions have always had at heart the motto "Faster, higher, stronger". Since the first African Games at Brazzaville in 1965, the second African Games at Lagos in 1973 have confirmed their establishment and the third edition, at Algiers in 1978, affirmed it. From these Games, and the various regional and international competitions, we retain an unforgettable impression of the performances of our athletes, which allows us to look towards the future with confidence.

The most moving souvenir is, without doubt, the wager won by the athlete in his own time, that of the composition of an homogeneous team of athletes coming from all parts of Africa. A few years ago, who would have thought that, braving the linguistic difficulties, the enormous distances which separate the different countries of our Immense continent, an African team made up of athletes from Tunisia, Kenya, Senegal, Somalia and other countries in the north, south, east, west and centre of the continent, would one day travel outside Africa? Nevertheless, this is what happened in Durham (USA) in 1971, for the first time. That year, the African athletics team, captained by Keino, paraded on the track at Durham behind the flag of the SCSA to confront its American counterpart. It was a wonderful sight. These young men and women formed a moving tableau, the symbol of hope for an Africa united by sport. This was

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repeated in 1973 at Guadalajara in Mexico with a delegation composed of continental teams in basketball, boxing, athletics and football.

Other initiatives of this type followed. The names of famous Africans have shone in international circles ; crowds of spectators the world over have given them an enthusiastic reception. Who can forget the name of Abebe Bikila, the barefooted marathon runner who, savouring his victory, continued to carry out limbering up exercises in the Olympic stadium, while those who came after him were carried away on stretchers, and a jubilant crowd rose to its feet to cheer him. That was at the Olympic Games in Rome in 1960. It was there also that the world discovered Gamoudi, the torch-bearer of the Tunisian athletes, and many more. At the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 1964, Abebe Bikila did it again. Since then other African athletes have achieved outstanding exploits - the names of Keino, Temu, Namo, Wold, Mirus Yfter, Rono, Akibua come to mind. This is why the IOC is to be congratulated on setting up an Athletes Commission and giving it aid and support. Since the Xlth Olympic Congress at Baden-Baden, this Commission has spoken out on the dangers which threaten sport, and reflected on ways and means to eliminate these scourges. The recognised characteristics of sport are physical effort and play. If physical effort was all that was required, sport would lose all originality. A docker carries out a job which involves constant muscular effort. Although the exercise is intense it is not sport, since the notion of "play" is absent. The housewife who faces the jostling crowds every day to go shopping dispenses considerable energy, and this has been evaluated by modern studies. However, it would never occur to anyone to call it sport.

It is therefore correct to say that in both cases there is an element which is absent in daily activity, but present and much sought after in sports activity. In fact, sport's special interest lies in a psychological participation which includes the element of "play", the desire for liberation of the mind and body, a certain respect for rules, and constant self-appraisal and comparison with others.

This means that without the athlete there would be no "play" and therefore no sport.

Hence the continuing interest in giving greater importance to the athlete by putting at his disposal adequate means for development and fulfilment of his intrinsic and collective qualities. It seems to us very important that, while following the original aim of forming a sports elite capable of rivalling top class athletes from other continents, it is very necessary to draw increased attention to the problem of illiteracy in sport, which is no less serious than the problem of cultural illiteracy in general.

Following this line of thought, the reassertion of the value of our tradition physical and sporting practices, (which are currently undergoing a process of "folklorisation") for the benefit of modern Western sport, has become a necessity. It would make the practice of sport a right, indeed a duty, and sports and physical education an element of popular education.

Conclusion

And so it is that, having been kept away from sports stadia and Olympic competitions during the colonial period, Africa is henceforth an active member, in her own right, of the Olympic family. Several of her sons are members of the International Olympic Committee, including, amongst others, Mr. Mohamed Mzali, Prime Minister of Tunisia, and for a long time Vice-President of the IOC. and Ambassador Louis Girandou N'Diaye of the Ivory Coast, who is currently a Vice-President of the IOC. The African members of the IOC play a primordial role in the revelation of the ideas of the Olympic Movement in Africa. This is why this role, and the place reserved today for African problems by the IOC and its President. H.E. Mr. Juan Antonio Samaranch, lead us to conclude that from now on the ring which represents our continent on the emblem which floats above the Olympic Games has found a profound significance in Africa, and acquired, after the many ups and downs inherent in all human activity, fame in sport, and the respect of the four others, for the glory of sport and the Olympic Movement.

J.-C. G.

