

## **The Muscle Trade: International track and field athlete mobility, colonialism and development**

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### **Abstract**

The migration of athletes from one country to another in pursuit of better financial rewards has been a source of considerable controversy. The academic critique of this process draws on development and exploitation literatures, such as Bale's (1991) construct of 'brawn drain', Andreff's concept of 'muscle-drain' (2006), and Hoberman's notion of 'slave-trade' (2007). However, the empirical support for these perspectives is limited and tends to rely on Association Football. The movement of track and field athletes competing under the auspices of the IAAF, has received little academic attention. We provide an empirical analysis of country of allegiance transfers from 1998-2008 and demonstrate that there is a periphery-core migration pattern, but that this is significantly influenced by former colonial ties. Spain, France and Great Britain follow this pattern. We also demonstrate that there has been a trade in athletic talent into oil-rich states, especially from East Africa. Finally we discuss the case of Turkey, a major importer of talent. Our analysis offers an empirical base to further the sociological models of commercialisation, development, and sport.

**Keywords:** sport, track and field, labour migration, athletics, development, colonialism

The migration of athletes from one country to another typically elicits populist responses that are couched in nationalistic discourses of treason and betrayal (Viriri 2009; Jeffery 2005) or tied to the nebulous 'spirit of sport' and sportsperson-ship (Goff 2006). On the other hand, academic analysis concentrates on how and why athletes move between countries. Typical of this view are Bale's (1991) construct of 'brawn drain', Andreff's concept of 'muscle-drain' (2006: 312), and Hoberman's notion of 'slave-trade' (2007). These positions argue that the developed west continues to take advantage of the third world for the supply of labour. This

perspective is based in a political economy view of development whereby the first world exploits the third world – in this case through the extraction of athletic labour. This analysis of the international division of labour draws on the long history of third world studies and in particular world-systems theorists such as Wallerstein (1974) and all those that have followed (e.g., Dunaway 2003; Hofmeister and Breitenstein 2008). We seek to analyse the claims of western exploitation around athlete migration by mapping and explaining the migration patterns of track and field athletes from 1998-2008. Our analysis demonstrates that there is indeed a muscle drain from the third to the first (and oil rich) worlds and that this flow is assisted by colonial linkages. While athlete movement in some sports has been analysed, for example association football (cf Madeiro 2007), baseball (Chiba 2004) and American Football (Longley et al 2008), professional track and field athletics, under the auspices of the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), has had limited academic interest in general (Bale 1999) and no English language analysis of athlete migration specifically (see Gay 2006 for a French paper). Our paper offers the first empirical analysis of athlete movement and provides the much needed evidence to allow further critique.

The data for this study originates from the IAAF's website (iaaf.org 2009), where they publish the official notifications of transfers of allegiance. From 1998 to 2008, 228 athletes changed allegiance and these transfers form the data for this study. These transfers are the official means by which athletes change their country of representation. The current IAAF rules on transfer of allegiance stipulate a three year waiting period that can be reduced to twelve months with the agreement of the relevant member federations (the two countries involved) or reduced to no waiting time at the discretion of the IAAF (IAAF 2009). In practice, the twelve month restriction is what applies in the vast majority of cases. Of the transfers reported for

2008/09, only one out of the twenty-five athletes has a three year waiting period, the remaining twenty-four had a waiting period of one year or less.

A significant caveat to our study needs to be noted. The dataset only represents nationality transfers; it does not include the substantial number of athletes who move for training, education and competition purposes but maintain their country of origin allegiance for inter-country competition (e.g., the Olympics and World Championships). Furthermore, it only captures athletes who have been registered by their country's athletics association and not those who move before registration. This usually occurs at the junior level, and there is some evidence of athlete poaching at this level (Musumba 2007). As such, this study must be taken as indicative of overall movements until a fuller analysis that incorporates all athlete movement for all reasons can be undertaken – if such information can reliably be sourced.

We first summarized individual player movements to create a country-level athlete movement dataset of athlete flows. This dataset was then mapped using ArcGIS, a geographic information system. Finally, we calculated a measure of athlete flows using the following equation:

$$\text{Flow} = \text{Number of Imports} - \text{Number of Exports}$$

In general terms, the movement of athletes follows a core-periphery pattern (Figure 1). The traditional 'Northern' developed countries of Europe and North America are net importers, as are the developed countries of the 'South'; Australia, New Zealand and Brazil. It must also be noted that there is significant movement of athletes between developed countries, demonstrating the ease of mobility within the first world for elite sportspeople. The importing African countries of Benin, Liberia and

Guinea represent small movements of only one athlete migrating in, and for Sudan, two in and one out. The lack of movement from South and South-East Asia represents those countries' lack of focus on track and field athletics. The significant country movements for this study are the former colonial powers of Spain, France and Great Britain; the movement to specific oil rich countries; and the curious case of Turkey. Each of these will be dealt with in turn.

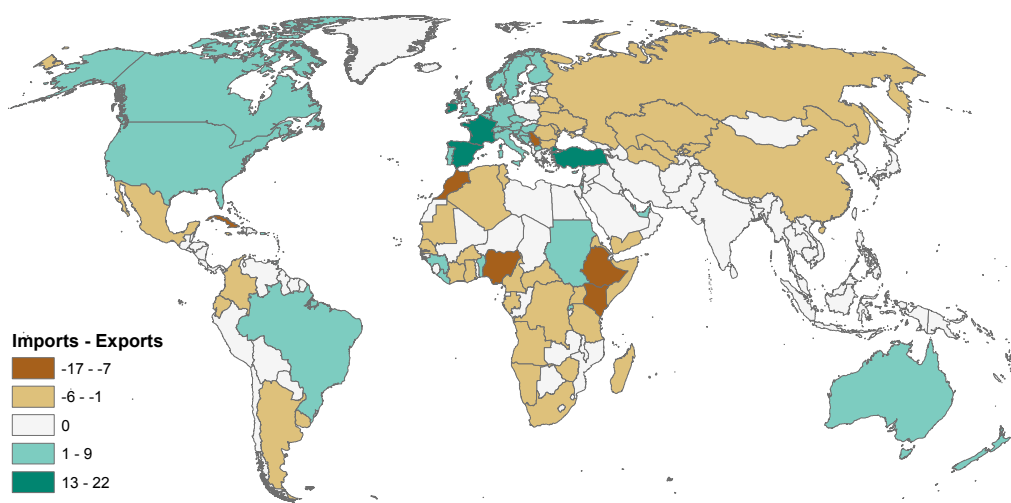


Figure 1 Global flow of athletes

The great colonial imperialising powers of Great Britain, France and Spain continue to reap the benefits of their former empires. The remaining major colonial powers, Belgium, Netherlands, Italy, Portugal and Germany did not receive major flows from their former colonies. This is unsurprising given the limited number of colonies that these imperial powers controlled and, in some cases, the restricted time of control (e.g., Germany losing its colonies as a result of WWI). In the case of Portugal, Brazil has become a major sporting powerhouse in its own right, mitigating the need for

track and field athletes to move to Europe (with the exception of Association Football, see Madeiro 2007).

Spain supports the colony explanation, with the bulk of their flows originating from Spanish-speaking former colonies in South and Central America (twelve of twenty athletes). Cuba has provided eight athletes to Spain. While this flow is partly explained by colonial relationships, the sheer volume of Cuban athletes leaving Cuba for Europe (thirteen in all) is more generally a function of poverty and US trade restrictions. The US has missed out on a significant number of athletes by restricting their movement from Cuba as the close proximity, historical links, shared language and collegiate athletics system should make the US an attractive place for migration (for a history of US-Cuba migration see Eckstein and Barberia 2002). As athletics is controlled globally solely by the IAAF and its member federations, the Cuban government can restrict track and field athlete movement by refusing a transfer. Conversely, Cuban baseball players have had far more success in leaving Cuba and playing in US professional competitions (Pettavino and Pye 2002). Of note is the flow of four athletes from Nigeria to Spain, which cannot be explained by colonial ties.

France has a very strong trade in athletes with French speaking West African countries (Figure 2). France gained thirty-four athletes and lost twelve. Morocco provided twelve of the athletes; testimony to its language heritage and geographic proximity. The relationship of France with its former colonies is particularly close although troubled, with the French language being central to this connection (Lazreg 2009). Moreover, the citizenship rights that France extends to its former colonies encourages and enables migration from West Africa to France, and subsequent allegiance change.

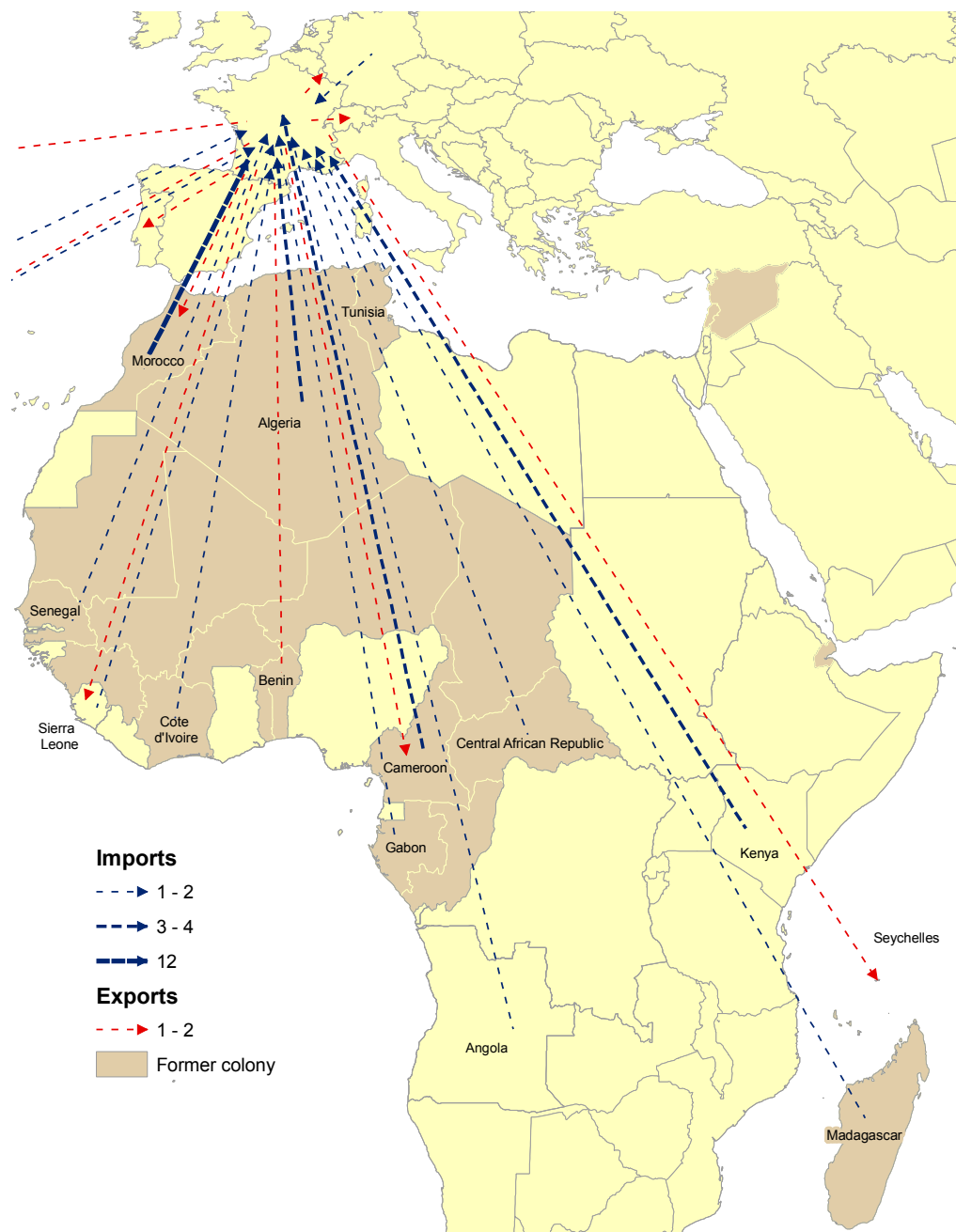


Figure 2 – Athlete migration to and from France

The trade in and out of Great Britain is even more structured by former colonial ties than that of Spain and France. Eleven athletes left Great Britain, all to former colonies or close nations (eight to Ireland, one each to Australia, Canada and Malta). Its

fourteen imported athletes originated from Australia, Jamaica, USA, Ireland (3), Germany, Ethiopia (5) and Canada (2). The majority of British flows (57%) were to former colonies.

What is noteworthy is that the flows in and out are relatively equal. Great Britain is the only major colonial power that did not benefit from a large influx of athletes from its former colonies. This is because many of the major colonies are powerful sporting countries in their own right, in particular Australia, Canada and USA. These countries themselves are first world, athletically developed countries that were net importers of talent. What may appear curious is the absence of migration from South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka) to Great Britain given the development discrepancy, colony status and strong general migration patterns from these countries to Great Britain. However, these countries have little presence in track and field athletics, with much of their sporting focus being directed to another colonial game – cricket (Kaufman and Patterson, 2005).

Polley (1998:49) notes that pre-World War II, ‘the global flows of athletic talent migration as they affected the UK were largely constrained by imperial ties. After the war, the increasingly international character of sport facilitated growth in such opportunities, with British sports featuring both as exporters and as importers.’ Track and field movements support Polley’s analysis of historical talent flows. Thus, Great Britain is a special case as its colonies, as opposed to those of France and Spain, are better developed and have stronger (more competitive) sporting cultures. Nonetheless, it is surprising that Great Britain does not reap the same benefit from its former African colonies that France does. However, a different ‘pull’ factor is involved in the movement of athletes from East Africa.

There has been a significant movement in athletes from developing countries, especially East African, to oil rich states, particularly those in the Gulf. Qatar's seven imports consisted of five Kenyans, a Nigerian and a Ugandan. Kenya is highly illustrative of this process and warrants an extended analysis as it captures the controversy around athlete movement. Kenya exported eighteen athletes, with none going to Great Britain and only three going to another English speaking country – the USA. Eight athletes went to countries that could pay for their services – Brunei (3) and Qatar (5). These movements are commonplace in track and field, with athletes lured to compete for a new nation by significant financial incentives. For example, Stephen Cherono, a Kenyan steeplechaser, moved to Qatar because of a large financial package, including US\$1000 a month for life (Omok 2004). Ten Kenyans competed at the 2003 world championships for countries other than Kenya (Woodward 2004). These nationality moves often include a name change, as two former Kenyans, now Qataris, illustrate; Stephen Cherono is now Saif Saeed Shaheen (Omok 2004) and Leonard Mucheru became Mushir Salim Jawher, only to switch back again (Mutuota, 2007). The athletes themselves rarely reside in the Gulf States, as 2005 transferee Maryam Jamal notes: 'I was born in Ethiopia, I train in Switzerland, but I represent Bahrain' (Kano 2007). Europe offers better training facilities, coaches and proximity to major competitions.

These moves from poor countries to oil rich ones have been heavily criticised, by the commentariat and by the countries losing their athletes. The National President of the National Athletics Association of Zimbabwe (NAAZ) has likened the trade to a 'poverty game' (Viriri, 2009). Goff (2006), in a representative attack on the practice commented:

The charge is led by Qatar, followed closely by Bahrain. Falconry not being an Olympic sport, the sheiks have been troubled of late by the lack of silverware in their trophy rooms, so they have been putting their liquid gold to work in an attempt to remedy the situation. Rather than trying the old fashioned way of cultivating home-grown talent, they just buy it in. Millions of petrodollars have been dangled in front of top athletes from poor countries to entice them to switch allegiance to the tiny desert nations.

Echoing the slave-trade metaphor of Hoberman (2007), Njenga and Macharia (2005) note that Kenya 'is losing its best athletes in what is being referred to as modern day slave trade or human trafficking'. International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge has attacked the trade in athletes, noting that 'It was "not legitimate" for athletes to switch nations solely for financial reasons' (Goff 2006) and further that 'from a moral point of view we should avoid this transfer market in athletes' (Woodward 2004). One must be wary of an IOC official attacking an athlete for having financial concerns given the monetary value of the Olympics. Further, the idea that athletes should be unpaid amateurs competing for the love of sport was a source of considerable controversy and conflict for the IAAF in the 1990s and culminated in athletes being paid appearance and winning fees (Connor and McEwen 2008). These debates have occurred in an evidence vacuum and focused on particular athletes. Given our results, the criticisms warrant further analysis.

Finally, Turkey is a peculiar outlier within the data, with sixteen athletes moving to the country (Figure 3), eleven in 1998-1999 alone. The countries of origin are Russia (5), Bulgaria (4), Belarus (2), Turkmenistan (1), Romania (1), and Ethiopia (3). Excluding the African migration, these moves are from geographically close countries that Turkey has long-standing political and cultural ties with. Of those eleven athletes who migrated in 1998-1999, all changed their names upon transfer/citizenship and at least four became Turkish citizens through marriage. Five were connected with athletics clubs in Istanbul (this information was sourced by searching personal web

pages of the athletes). While it is very difficult to trace the reasons behind these athlete moves from secondary data, it appears that they took advantage of migration rules in Turkey to move to the country via marriage. Their countries of origin at this point were not funding athletics, whereas Turkey had a strong club athletic system. Thus, the proximity of Turkey to sites of major competitions, the inter-connectedness of athletics in Eastern Europe and ease of transfer may all have been factors that encouraged their shift. This curious migration pattern has been mirrored in other sports, with Maguire and Pearton (2000) noting that there seemed to be a significant number of African soccer players who played in the 1998 World Cup and who then migrated to Turkey. Maguire and Pearson (2000:184) comment that ‘the position of Turkey is unclear and requires further study.’



Figure 3 – Turkish migration

**Conclusion:**

Our study of IAAF sanctioned transfers of allegiance from 1998-2008 supports the argument that athletes move from the third world to the first world and that these movements are significantly influenced by a nation's colonial heritage. France and Spain have benefited from their former colonies, whereas Great Britain has not – a result of successful sporting development in many of its key former colonies. We have demonstrated that the third world does provide essential labour to the western athletic enterprise, even with a limited data set that does not include the influence of the USA collegiate track and field enterprise.

Athletes themselves move for a number of reasons, including to follow or find coaches, to receive further education, for financial incentives and often for better training and support systems. As noted in a history of athletics in Oceania, the only developmental opportunities for athletes 'involve athletes leaving their own countries to spend time overseas where facilities and coaching are available' (McEwen 2007:134). This is particularly the case with the highly technical field events such as pole vaulting where training facilities and equipment are expensive and complex. These resources are only available in the athletically developed nations (Connor 2009:336).

This study demonstrates that athletes are an exception to the rule that most migration from the periphery to the core is highly restricted and controlled (the other exception being highly educated workers (cf. Levy 2003; Bhargava and Docquier 2008)). The first world sporting countries, along with select oil rich states, offer opportunities for third world athletes that their countries of origin cannot match. Now that the muscle trade in track and field athletics has been empirically demonstrated, sociologists of

sport can return to the arguments around why, how and what this means for our models of sport, commercialism and development (Connor 2010).

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