

National identities at the 2018 World Cup in Russia

It is often claimed that football connects and unites communities of people and therefore transgresses cultural boundaries. FIFA's rhetoric at its 2018 World Cup held in Russia perpetuated this image. The official FIFA marketing claims that this global sports event brings together people from all over the globe sharing common interests and passions. If the World Cup is an event that embodies global connectivity, what then is the role of national identities?

National identity plays a central role at the World Cup, not only because the participating teams represent nation-states, but also because the cultural specificity of each nation is emphasized by organisation, corporations and fans. In addition to the flags, painted faces and outfits in national colours, many fans on the stands and streets added other humorous, colourful and recognizable 'typical' elements from national folklore: Nigerian leopard print, Belgian lion's fur, Mexican sombreros, Aztec *plumerías* (feather work) and Mariachi outfits, Egyptian pharaoh headdresses and Polish floral- crowns.[1] As the word 'inter-national' indicates, global connectivity and the celebration of national specificity is not a contradiction: people participate in a global event, yet they participate as members of a nation, each with its own culture. Even when a global community temporarily emerges, the building blocks, the entities that engage in the exchange, remain national.

The idea that each nation is somehow unique is noticeable not only in the distinctive aesthetic features but also in the belief that nation possesses its own inner, psychological character. Often, this national character is a tool to interpret a team's game on the pitch. One example (of many) concerns a comment by the Danish former player Kenneth Pérez when he was asked which team disappointed him the most: "Denmark. I do not refer to the fact we lost in the second round, but to the manner in which we played. They were not playing at all-in accordance with the Danish DNA. It was so steady, it looked more like Norway." [2]

After winning the semis against England, the Croatian coach also explained the team's performance by invoking a more general and 'deeper' passionate national character: "our team was losing three times and had to come back. We are that kind of people, proud and of strong character. This is fantastic for Croatian football and country, [...] we do not have a stadium, these are our circumstances, but we do have passion and quality players." [3] In other words, how the given team *plays* is explained by how the nation *is*.

The choices for guests during the Dutch television coverage of the World Cup were also likely motivated by their assumed national character. The broadcaster invites a guest whose nationality is in congruence with the country playing that day. Whether a matter of self-positioning or imputation from the outside, the guest always functioned as a familiar intermediary between the viewer and the foreign national character or culture. The guest is not only expected to know the nation's unique individuality, but also to embody it. For example, Dutch citizens of Moroccan descent are invited to talk as Moroccans about the *a-priori* assumed alleged Moroccanness of the Moroccan team.

The potency of national identities as a way of looking at the world lies not only in their omnipresence and unconscious usage, but also in the often playful and ironic modes in which they are used. A dialogue between commentators during a Colombia match broadcast by the Dutch NPO was a telling example of 'playful' national stereotyping, describing how Colombian fans could afford a ticket to Russia. The short dialogue between the commentators proceeded as follows:

A: "...it's like a yellow sea at the stadium."

B: "Colombia is not a rich country."

A: "You are asking yourself how these people got there? It could be that they saved money for years, it could be."

B: "...but you know, Escobar has buried his money and cocaine everywhere, it could be that Colombians have a box with cocaine in their backyard."

A: "In Rotterdam we know a lot about that Colombian cocaine" [referring to the city's harbour where a lot of international drug smuggling takes place].

The 2018 World Cup was also an event where national identity was a contested issue. One scandal concerned the French player Antoine Griezmann, after he expressed support and love for Uruguay by claiming he is "half Uruguayan." [4]. Luis Suarez, the Uruguayan star striker, responded: "Antoine is saying that he is half-Uruguayan but he is French and he doesn't know what it is to feel Uruguayan. [...] He doesn't know who we are or what we must do to be successful in football. He enjoys our customs and can speak the same language, but we feel differently." Suarez's view on what it means to be a real Uruguayan was predicated on the distinction between superficial knowing and deep feeling. His claim triggered a non-verbal response on the part of Griezmann, who held a press conference wrapped in the Uruguayan flag after he won the World Cup.

Often, the contestation over national identity concerns players with a migrant background. As the Netherlands did not qualify for the 2018 World Championship, a recurring topic on talk shows was which other country would gain Dutch support. As the Moroccan team fielded several Dutch-born players, many Dutch commentators supported this team. The reason why this support is often expressed as an ironic 'confession' is the implied awareness of the tension underlying this gesture of sympathy: on the one hand, there is the widely accepted self-image that the Dutch are anti-nationalist and that overt nationalism is bad. At the same time, the fact that even a non-Dutch surrogate is used to celebrate Dutchness by emphasizing its Dutch connections reveals a nationalistic desire. This tension becomes even greater as the surrogate concerns an ostracised group in the Netherlands whose allegedly 'Islamic' culture is stereotypically essentialised as antithetic to the Dutch culture. Yet for the sake of celebrating Dutchness even when the Dutch are absent, this group is temporarily and therefore ironically embraced as 'Dutch'.

The main attitude towards these players is negative since their choice to play for Morocco rather than the Dutch team is perceived as a lack of loyalty and gratitude to the Netherlands, the country where these Dutch-Moroccans were born. According to many Dutch-Moroccans themselves, the explanation as to why these players preferred Morocco over the Netherlands should not only be

sought in pragmatism and an emotional connection to Morocco, but first and foremost in nationalist exclusion: they feel treated as non-Dutch aliens, even more so since prominent right-wing politicians (such as Geert Wilders, Thierry Baudet and Mark Rutte) have normalized overt xenophobia in the public sphere.

Nationalistic xenophobia is, of course, not only a Dutch phenomenon. Born in Sweden to Assyrian parents, the Swedish player Jimmy Durmaz received a storm of racist insults and death threats addressed to him and his family, after he had made a mistake in the match against Germany. The next day, he responded to this nationalistic xenophobia with a message to his critics. With his hand on his chest and the whole Swedish team standing behind him as a gesture of support and unity, Durmaz's speech explicitly embraces an inclusive notion of Swedishness: "But to be called 'bloody darkie' and 'suicide killer,' and for my family, my children, to have death threats.... that is completely unacceptable. I am Swedish and I am proud to be wearing this shirt and our flag. We stand united. We are Sweden." [5]

After having a similar experience to Durmaz, the German Arsenal star Mesut Özil decided to quit the national team after the World Cup: "A German fan told me after the game, 'Özil, fuck off you Turkish shit, piss off you Turkish pig.' I don't want to even discuss the hate mail, threatening phone calls and comments on social media that my family and I have received [...] They all represent a Germany of the past, a Germany that I am not proud of. I am confident that many proud Germans who embrace an open society would agree with me." [6]

Similar tensions between national identity and the descendants of migrants occurred in France. France becoming world champions with a large number of black players with African roots, triggered yet again the question of 'Frenchness' of the French team. One prevailing opinion in France, and Europe more broadly, is that the team may play *for* France but it is not really French. The implicit premise is that Frenchness coincides with whiteness. The uncomfortable blackness of the French team might also be the reason why Marine le Pen, the leader of the far-right party Front National, has left this extraordinary instance of national pride uncommented, avoiding the dilemma between national pride and racism. Conflating Frenchness and whiteness, a Dutch columnist posed the rhetorical question "How would the Senegalese or Nigerians react if their football team would consist of 17 whites and 6 blacks?" [7]. The author did not reject the blackness of an European team directly as he sympathised with the assumption that the predominantly 'white' masses in France did not identify with the black players.

A stance towards the Frenchness of French team with black players states that this 'multi-ethnic' team not only represents the successful integration of migrants in French society, but also that it reflects the nation's actual ethnic makeup. Moreover, the African and/or Islamic backgrounds of the players are emphasized, not with the purpose to exclude or to problematize but rather to enhance acceptance and emancipation by focusing on the positives. Professor Khaled Beydoun and the comedian Trevor Noah are good international examples. [8] Where many European voices on the French team employ the notion of Africanness in a denigrating way, as something at odds with

authentic Frenchness, it is rather used positively by many Africans who celebrated the French victory as their own.[9]

Contrastingly, another distinct stance on the Frenchness of the French team is reasonably particular of France itself, especially by those who would support the fact that the term 'race' was removed from the French constitution.[10] This attitude boils down to simply avoiding the racial dimension as such, and constructs a France which is *la indivisible*, beyond ethnicity or race. A direct clash between idea of France as a melting pot and the idea of the colour-blind France took place recently on The Daily Show (see on Youtube "Trevor Responds to Criticism from the French Ambassador - Between The Scenes"[11]).

These three views – mono-racism, melting-pot and colour blindness – clearly differ in how they approach the issue of blackness in relation to French national identity. However, what they have in common is more fundamental: the national team does not only represent a state but it also reflects (or should reflect) its culture and character (Frenchness).

National and ethnic stereotyping as illustrated by several examples from the 2018 World Cup is not something new. During the European Championships in 2000, the Argentine former footballer and Real Madrid manager of Real Madrid Jorge Valdano reflected on Scandinavian football from an international perspective. Conflating football tactics, (Montesquieu-style) climatological racism and cultural essentialism, he writes: "The Scandinavians believe in "all for one and one for all": a philosophy alien to Latin cultures. It makes them strong as a team and increases their value individually. They are top-class raw material, well-built and with great competitive instinct. [...] I don't like having to recognise the quality of Scandinavian players, and not just because their style is completely different from ours. To South Americans, Northern European football is lightyears away from their way of life. It's the classic short-ball game versus the long ball, heat versus cold, football that sweeps away the opposition versus cool calculation. Globalisation softens the barriers between these styles, but if three things remain the same - the weather, social conditions and a society's collective subconscious - someone born in Uruguay and someone born in Norway will continue to respond differently to soccer." [12]

The FIFA 2018 World Cup reminds us of three important patterns in national characterization. First, it is omnipresent. Second, it occurs in many related forms with overlapping functions (humorous, playful, politicized, racist, emotional, commercial, etc.). Third, national characterization is actually not nation specific as the very same traits are attributed to different 'nations' in different national contexts.

Endnotes

- [1] For example, <https://www.news8000.com/sports/the-colorful-fans-of-2018-world-cup/753087526>
- [2] "Mijn grootste teleurstelling is Denemarken. Dan doel ik niet op de uitschakeling in de tweede ronde, maar vooral de manier waarop. Ze speelden geheel niet volgens het Deense DNA. Het leek wel op Noorwegen, zo degelijk was het. Daar is ook veel kritiek op in eigen land.
<https://nos.nl/wk2018/artikel/2241744-de-wereldkampioen-weerspiegelt-een-tijdperk-en-dat-belooft-niet-veel-goeds.html>
- [3] "Naša je momčad tri puta bili u ponoru i dizala se. Mi smo takav narod, ponosni i karakterni. Ovo je za hrvatski nogomet i državu fantastično [...] nemamo stadion, to su naši uvjeti, ali zato imamo srce i kvalitetu igrača."
<https://sportske.jutarnji.hr/rusija2018/vijesti/zlatko-dalic-nakon-utakmice-poslao-ostru-poruku-francuzima-i-laznim-strucnjacima-dragi-bog-nam-je-dao-sansu-da-se-osvetimo-francuzima-a-strucnjaci/7597074/>
- [4] <http://www.marca.com/en/football/spanish-football/2017/10/12/59df98af22601db77b8b45d1.html>
- [5] <https://www.vogue.com/article/jimmy-duramaz-sweden-world-cup-team-racist-attacks>
- [6] <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2018/jul/22/mesut-ozil-retires-german-national-team-discrimination>
- [7] <https://www.trouw.nl/opinie/hoe-zouden-senegalezen-reageren-als-hun-voetbalselectie-uit-17-blanken-en-6-zwarten-bestond-~af6fd5c1/>
- [8] <https://nos.nl/wk2018/artikel/2241800-afrikanen-zijn-altijd-immigranten-totdat-ze-een-wk-winnen.html>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COD9hcTpGWQ&t=29s>
- [9] <http://www.goal.com/en/news/congratulations-africa-nigerians-celebrate-france-2018-world-cup-/1ejhpele9t8oe15lyjdolzii6x>
See also: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/07/10/why-calling-france-the-last-african-team-in-the-world-cup-is-problematic/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7963664ec4a7
- [10] <https://qz.com/1316951/french-mps-removed-the-word-race-from-the-countrys-constitution/>
- [11] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COD9hcTpGWQ&t=29s>
- [12] <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2000/jun/19/euro2000.sport2>