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Title

The Broken Rings of the Olympic Ideal

Permalink

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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 13(2-3)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1984

DOI

10.5070/F7132-3017085

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THE BROKEN RINGS OF THE OLYMPIC IDEAL

by

Carol B. Thompson

In what relation do the Olympic Games stand to the reality of the world in which the majority of the population lives in what the United Nations classifies as developing nations? How important are the games for these poor countries where a child born is ten times more likely to die within the first year than one born in a rich country? Do the Games make any sense, for example, in Africa, where food production has fallen 30 percent below basic subsistence, with per capita consumption declining during the "development decades" of the 1960's and 1970's?

In this situation of actual life and death, how can one even talk of sports development? Before the Olympic Games of 1968, the students in Mexico City protested against the extravagance of the Games. Ten days before the Games started, 10,000 people demonstrated in the Square of the Three Cultures. The military surrounded them and opened fire. Official estimates admit 600 killed; but the students say that over 1100 were killed and 3000 injured.¹ The protesters wanted bread, not medals for a few.

Since the tragedy of Mexico City, the developing countries have called for a new international sports order which integrates sports as a part of overall development. The view is that economic and socio-cultural orders cannot be discussed separately. It is not simply that sports are fun and popular, but that physical education is necessary for the development of the total person.

ECONOMIC DOMINANCE

The question, therefore, is not one of sports versus development needs, but about who controls what sports for whom? Sports competition is enjoyed by almost everyone -- including African children playing soccer with a ball of rags* or the sandlot baseball played in poorer neighborhoods of the United States. Developing countries are enthusiastic participants and fully support the Olympic Movement. However, the pattern of allocation of resources, relative power, justice and equity in sport reflects the dominant world economic system. Sports cannot be separated from the international economic power relations; indeed, as even Americans have learned from the Moscow boycott in

*See e.g. Moeketsi Bodibe's account in this issue.

1980, they reflect it. As in economic relations, sports in developing nations are underdeveloped, dependent on, and exploited by the West. Developing nations, therefore, view the Olympic Movement quite differently from the West.

The Olympic Movement cannot really claim to be fully international. The five rings of the Olympic symbol, which are supposed to represent the five continents -- Africa, Asia, Americas, Europe and Australia -- should be reduced to three, for the Games remain dominated by the West.

The Olympic events, for example, are composed of games originating in either Greece or England; judo is the only exception. Tae Kwan Do, an eastern martial art, has been "recognized" by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), but has not yet passed through the second stage of "acceptance." It will not be played as an Olympic sport until 1992.

OLD CRITERIA, NEW PRACTICES

There are two criteria for acceptance as an Olympic sport. First, it must be practiced in 50 countries on 3 continents. Several traditional Olympic sports no longer meet this condition, e.g. white water canoeing; and a review of sport eligibility is on the IOC calendar for 1985. However, if a sport is ruled ineligible, it will not be dropped until 1992.² The second criterion is that a sport must be represented by one international sports federation as the recognized body which sets the rules of the game (e.g. how high a basketball hoop is to be). This criterion eliminates some widely practiced sports like karate -- whose Korean and Japanese masters do not agree on "proper" stances and form. The present Olympic sports, therefore, are overwhelmingly c-g-s sports: that is to say, victory is measured in centimeters, grams and seconds. With the long list of Olympic events, the IOC argument is that there is little room for possible hundreds of non-Western sports. Would U.S. athletes dominate jai-alai as they do basketball? Would East Germans excel in wu-shu as they do in the pool? The medal count would look quite different if fencing, rowing, discus and hammer throw were replaced by oina, sumo, bocce, and pesapallo. Indigenous folk games, practiced throughout history by millions, have been ignored. Who is to say that African dancing is not as athletically demanding as rhythmic gymnastics?

The Western, industrialized nations' dominance of the Olympics is also illustrated by the venues of the modern Games. Only once has it been held in Asia -- in Japan in 1964, but only after that country had joined the "developed" world. Mexico is the only developing country to have received the Games; and if they are held in Seoul, South Korea, it will be

the second time in 92 years either to be held in the East or in a developing country. Juan Antonio Samaranch, the President of the IOC, has announced that future selection of sites, for 1992 and beyond, will have to reflect "political considerations."³ However, he is not referring to the desirability of finding venues in developing, non-Western nations, but rather of trying to avoid the Cold War stand-off between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. It is doubtful whether the Games will be held in South Korea, for it remains a war zone; an armistice between North and South Korea has never been signed. In addition, the U.S.S.R. does not recognize it as a state. Would the U.S. go to Angola, a country which it does not yet recognize, for the Games?

WESTERN MALE OLIGARCHY

The selection of eligible sports and choice of venues are only symbolic of the total control over the Olympic Games exercised by the IOC. The Olympics belong to the IOC. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Games, set up the committee in 1894 to be "independent, international, sovereign, and assured of perpetuity."⁴ He did not mention that it would be an oligarchy as well. Members are voted in by the committee and until 1966 could serve for life; now they must retire at age 72. It was not until 1981 that three women were allowed to join, and they remain only three of 89 members. Its "international" character is distinctly Western, with 57 of the members from the Americas and Europe. Even though there are National Olympic Committees (NOC's) in 151 countries, only 71 nations are represented in the IOC because some countries hold two seats.⁵ This male, Western dominance has been challenged, but the oligarchy maintains control over all aspects of the Games.

Members of the IOC represent the Olympic Movement to their countries; in other words, they are ambassadors from the IOC, not to it. This relationship is used as an argument against the multiple calls for one country-one vote in the Olympic Movement. The present arrangement is supposed to reduce interference by governments in international sport. However, decisions by these "international" dons have reflected their class, cultural and political biases. The most serious threats to their club evolved from the developing countries. From the 1960's the newly independent countries recognized the Games for what they were -- an expression of the economic, political and ideological hegemony of the West. With the breakup of the colonial empires in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, politics did not enter the Olympics for the first time, for they had always been there; the politics, however, no longer followed simply the Western agenda.

POLITICAL PRECEDENTS

For the 1962 Asian Games, the Indonesian government refused to issue visas for athletes from Taiwan and Israel. In the same year, the U.S. and French governments would not allow East Germans to play in world championships held in the U.S. and France. These actions violate the Olympic Charter. Indonesia received the prescribed sanction: in February 1963, the IOC suspended the Indonesian Olympic Committee because they had not protested their government's action. Nothing was done to reprimand the U.S. and France.

To reject this hypocrisy, the Games of the New Emerging Forces, (GANEFO), were hosted by Indonesia, promoted and financed by the People's Republic of China (at the time not admitted to the Olympics). Fifty Third World nations sent athletes. As a Third World alternative to the Eurocentric Olympic the GANEFO was affirmed as a success. The movement was "based on the spirit of the 1955 Bandung Conference and the Olympic ideals, and was to promote the development of sports in new emerging nations so as to cement friendly relations among them."⁶ In the opening ceremony, Sukarno stated, "Let us declare frankly that sport has something to do with politics."

A second GANEFO was to have been held in Egypt in 1968. But by 1965 Sukarno had been overthrown by one of the bloodiest coups in history. In addition, GANEFO had been staged by governments and had ignored the international sports federations. Two countries, the PRC and North Vietnam, which were not members of federations had participated. Federations issued warnings to athletes not to participate in GANEFO; when some members did take part, they were barred from the Tokyo Olympic Games. In other words, world class athletes were sanctioned from other international competition if they played in GANEFO. Finally, Egypt decided it could not hold the games in 1968. GANEFO did not endure, but the movement did awaken the IOC to the fact that a new socio-political, and sports, order was evolving.

Organizing for GANEFO clearly set the context for the international struggle against Apartheid in sport in South Africa. South Africa played in the 1960 Games simply because it promised to integrate sport in the future. African, and many non-aligned, countries supported the appeal by South African exiles that the government was violating the Olympic principle of no racism in sport. In fact, the South African officials frequently stated they had no intention of allowing blacks to compete equally with whites. Yet it was only after extensive international organizing and protest that the IOC acted. By 1964 South Africa was not allowed to play in Tokyo. In 1968, Avery Brundage, the then President of the IOC, stated that South Africa would play

"if it were the only team and he was the only spectator."* However, athletes representing the regime were not permitted to play; the IOC had them stay away only after the threat of a major boycott in Mexico City. Black American athletes joined athletes from the Third World, U.S.S.R., and East Europe to convince the IOC that indeed, South Africa would be one of very few teams on the field if they played. In 1970, South Africa was expelled from the Olympics (Rhodesia was out by 1974.). The saga of the continuing struggle to isolate South Africa internationally is well documented, and it is not necessary to recapitulate it here.⁸ The IOC has now made it clear that Apartheid in sport must be eradicated before South Africa is allowed back in. However, it is also clear that the IOC is talking only about sports; Apartheid in employment, education, etc., could continue and the IOC would readmit South Africa if competition and training for sport were "equal" and integrated. Those who organized themselves to oust South Africa were not challenging the Olympic principle; they were asking that it be enforced against an all white team from a developed country; it took a decade for the IOC to enforce it.

The most serious challenge to the IOC was in 1976 when members of UNESCO established the inter-governmental committee for sport. The committee met in Nairobi (Kenya), October 26 to November 30, 1976, to define its goals not only to concern sports development in the schools and universities but also to "have a say in top level international sporting events."⁹ They were raising the issue of one country - one vote to direct international sport. The Tripartite Commission, formed in 1973 of representatives from the IOC, the federations, and the NOC's, responded strongly with a Manifesto claiming full responsibility for sport in the field of high level competition. UNESCO compromised after a series of discussion and kept its major concern as physical education in schools. The issue is not resolved, however, for many governments, athletes and officials still think the IOC oligarchy is out-dated and belongs to the 19th century, not the 21st. The inability of the IOC to avoid Cold War politics in 1980 and 1984 is just one more recent exposure of the myth that politics is not a factor in the Olympics. Many people have argued for one country - one vote for over two decades; it is just a matter of time before the IOC will have to accept the rejection of Eurocentric dominance by the majority of the world.

The other arena of sport control is within the framework of international sports federations. Each federation sets the rules of its own sports. Many of these federations are far from being democratic and still follow a policy of weighted voting

*See Ed Ferguson's interview with Dennis Brutus in this issue.

-- justified by criteria determined by the number of people who practice the sport within each member country. In the International Amateur Athletic Federation (track and field), for example, the national member associations are ranked AA, A, B, C, D and have 8, 6, 4, 2, 1 votes respectively. In the International Lawn Tennis Federation, France and Britain have more votes than all of black Africa. Britain and the U.S.S.R. have separate vice-presidential quotas in the executive committee of the International Federation of Association Football (soccer).¹⁰ In 1976 the Fifth Conference of the Heads of State and Government of the Non-Aligned Countries called for "the democratization of international sports federations, and the abolition of apartheid in sports."¹¹ Many international federations have equal representation between industrialized and developing countries, but whether that represents equity is questionable. The weighted vote is an attempt to maintain the status quo, but it can only be a stalling tactic, for developing countries are gaining more of a voice in international sports.

The real deterrent to sports development is, of course, resources. Developing nations have only won 5 percent of the medals since 1896 not because they are inferior, but because they are poor. One success story from the organizing efforts of developing nations is the formation of the Olympic Solidarity Committee in 1973. Funds for the Solidarity Committee come from the vast revenues made through the sale of television rights to the Games. The host city received half the revenue; the IOC, NOC's, and international federations share equally the other half. The NOC's share -- or, one-sixth of the total -- is given to the Solidarity Committee which is used to train athletes and coaches in special workshops and sports sessions. It now guarantees that four athletes and two officials of any country with a NOC can be financed to attend the Olympic Games. Over \$35 million should be available to the Solidarity fund from the Los Angeles proceeds, a contribution to the development of world class athletes in poorer countries.

Since 1976, UNESCO provides some funds for physical education in the schools. By 1981, however, the funds were only \$628,000 total, and only 22 of the 186 member states had contributed.¹² Individual countries, of course, offer assistance to developing countries for sport. The U.S. mainly offers college scholarships to promising athletes so they can train with the best American coaches. The PRC has built many stadiums. The U.S.S.R. and Bulgaria have focused on training coaches. This assistance is welcome and necessary, but it also comes wrapped in the politics of the donor. Similar to food or technical aid, the developed countries prefer to give bilaterally rather than through multiple channels.

COMMERCIAL TYRANNY

The cost of training and travel for athletes is only one factor in the total cost of the Games. If developing countries want to send reporters or officials, the expense can be prohibitive. The Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee has been called "mercenary" by Olympic insider and reporter, John Rodda.¹³ He charges that the LAOOC is determined to get every last dollar it can out of the Games.* For example, the press will not have subsidized housing and the average room rate is \$85. A second telephone in the press center will cost between \$663 and \$957 depending on how early it is ordered. These expenses might not be much for the large corporate press in the West, but they are major concerns to Third World reporters. Monique Berlioux, the IOC Executive Director, said that the Committee had been "taken by surprise" by the high prices in Los Angeles.¹⁴ In the future, the IOC plans to use some of the television proceeds for press and broadcasters services.

Staging the Games is clearly beyond the pocketbook of developing nations, but they could become the venue if assistance were given. Much of the expenditure for facilities in Seoul, South Korea will, in fact, be financed by aid from the United States, an interesting fact given that American taxpayers refused to finance the Games in Los Angeles. They will be helping to finance them in Korea instead.

GO FOR THE GOLD, WITH AMERICAN MEDIA!

Media coverage of the Olympic Games expresses the Western dominance. Giving one network, ABC, exclusive rights to the Games means that Peruvians, Filipinos, Togolese and all others must view the Games as ABC broadcasts them. ABC does consult with others and has obligation in its contract to cover the diversity, but the broadcasts remain very American. The American press does not have a good record of covering the Olympics.** For instance, in 1968 Kip Keino of Kenya won the 1500 meter by a wide margin; but there is no film record of his victory because the cameras were focused on the American, Jim Ryun who was supposed to win but came in second. American media goes for the gold -- filming the winners and interviewing them.

There is a more dangerous twist to the ethnocentricity of the American media. With the preoccupation of security for the Los Angeles Games, much has been written about the problems

*This fact is depicted in the cover illustration of this issue.
(Ed. K.M.)

**Or anything else for that matter. (Ed. K.M.)

of terrorism. If one follows the press, however, a pattern emerges: the terrorists are described as ethnic minorities, mainly from the Third World. One is subtly taught that terrorists are mainly non-white. Brian Jenkins of the Rand Corporation, considered an expert on terrorism, gives this advice: ". . . the worst threat of terrorism at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics comes from ethnic-oriented extremist groups within the U.S. who have carried the quarrels of their old countries into ours . . . factions of right-wing Cuban exiles, Armenians, Croatians, pro and anti-Khomeini Iranians, Puerto Rican nationalists, Taiwanese separatists, Jewish extremists and Koreans are among the groups that are causing law enforcement agencies concern as they plan the Olympic security effort."¹⁵ A prominent Los Angeles Times reporter, Bob Oates, stated that "2700 years ago the civilized world included only the city-states of Greece, Athens, Sparta, and Thessalonika."¹⁶ (emphasis mine) Non-whites are viewed as not only inferior but dangerous.

STRUCTURAL CHANGE

The only way to overcome this ethnocentrism is to give rights to the Games to more than one corporation or country. Developing countries in calling for a new international information order know that pleading and discussion have not worked. The cameras and the reporters' pens still are carried by those with a limited world perspective. The IOC is discussing selling rights to more than one corporation, mainly because the broadcasting is now too expensive for one. The hope is that the IOC might consider broadcasters from several different areas of the world. In this way, perhaps the West can someday see the Olympics through the eyes of non-Western peoples.

The Olympics are extremely popular. Most peoples of the world enjoy the beauty of athletic excellence. Leaders of Third World countries agree with the World Health Organization that the goal of "Health for All by the Year 2000" includes adequate physical education for all children. Third World countries have improved their record in athletic achievements as many have become world class.

The important agenda that remains is the democratization of international sport. Only with more equitable distribution of resources and shared decision-making can high level competition become truly international. Cold War stances have detracted from the recent Olympics; perhaps the non-aligned countries can use these problems as an opportunity to demand basic structural transformation of the ruling bodies of international sport. The boycotts in Montreal, Moscow and Los Angeles are a major challenge to the Olympic Movement. Saving the Games will require more than mere tampering with the status quo; it will require a total reformulation of decision-making control. The

West no longer has an ideological, economic or political monopoly over the world, and the Olympic Games will reflect this fact.

NOTES

¹Reported by Harry Edwards, University of California, Berkeley, October 11, 1983.

²"Coming Together in the Great Arena of Sport," World Paper, Boston, June 1984, p. 4.

³New York Times, June 2, 1984.

⁴Monique Berlioux, "The History of the International Olympic Committee" in Lord Killanin and John Rodda, eds., The Olympic Games 1980, New York: MacMillan, 1979, p. 21.

⁵Geoffrey Miller, Beyond the Olympic Rings, Lynn, MA: H.O. Zimman, Inc., 1979, pp. 25-40.

⁶Richard Espy, The Politics of the Olympic Games, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981, p. 81.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Robert Archer and Antoine Bouillon, The South African Game,* London: Zed Press, 1982. Richard Lapchick, The Politics of Race and International Sport: The Case of South Africa. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1975. Sam Ramsamy, Apartheid: The Real Hurdle, London: International Defence and Aid, 1982.

⁹Don W.J. Anthony, "The North-South Dialogue in International Sports II," Olympic Review, no. 184-185, February-March, 1983, p. 120.

¹⁰Richard Lapchick, op. cit., pp. 75-77.

¹¹Aki Hietanen, "Towards a New International Sports Order?" Current Research on Peace and Violence, Vol. 5, no. 4, 1982, p. 160.

¹²Don W.J. Anthony, "The North South Dialogue in International Sports II," Olympic Review, no. 183, January 1983, p. 31.

¹³Los Angeles Times, February 4, 1984.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., October 5, 1983.

*See under book review section for a review of this book in this issue.--Ed. K.M.

16 ibid., October 18, 1983.