

El Chocolate y El Candombero: The African Influence on Argentine Football

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Abstract

This paper investigates the contributions of Afro-Argentines to Argentine society through the lens of football. There is a rich historiography of Argentine football and the impact of the many waves of European immigrants has been well discussed, as has that of indigenous people. However, in the relatively small canon of literature on Afro-Argentines, little reference has been made to their impact on the national game. The connection between Africans and Argentine football is deeper than one may think; an Afro-Argentine, Hector 'El Chocolate' Baley was part of the 1978 World Cup winning team. Furthermore, some Argentine clubs can trace part of their heritage back to African immigrants, such as San Telmo, nicknamed 'El Candombero' after the creole religious figure.

At the turn of the 19th century, Afro-Argentines made up over a third of the population according to historian George Reid Andrews. Their cultural and economic impact was commensurate. However, this importance has been occluded both in historiography and in the popular consciousness of the country. 'El Candombero', once a creole religious figure, now primarily refers to dressing small children up in blackface. This exclusion from history is exceptional in a Latin American context. In Uruguay, Argentina's neighbor and with a similar history of African heritage, 'candombe' refers to the Afro-Uruguayan practice of music and community expression. Argentina's neighbours and rival footballing powers have had and celebrated Afro-Latin players and styles of play – Garrincha in Brazil or Faustino Asprilla in Colombia being notable examples. My paper will investigate Afro-Argentine influence on the national sport, which is in many ways the keystone of Argentine identity. In doing so, I challenge historians to recover African contributions to Argentine history and society.